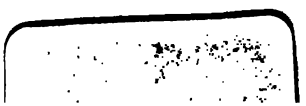
WHITE SHOULDERS



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BOOKS BY

GEORGE KIBBE TURNER

HAGAR'S HOARD

WHITE SHOULDERS

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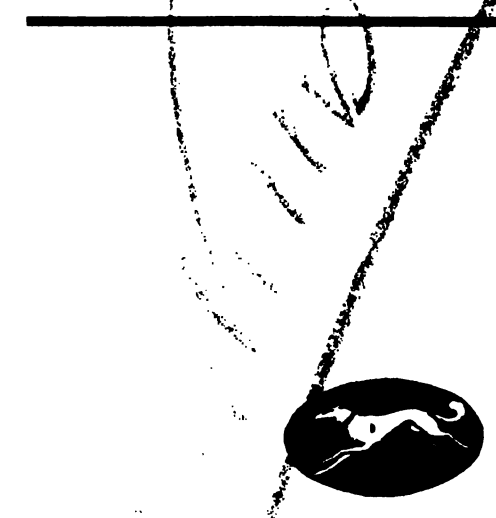

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WHITE SHOULDERS

I

IT IS the custom of our country, old Judge Cato Pendleton used to assert, for the matrons to lead in and offer up the marriageable virgins at three main seasons of the year, set apart by our unwritten tribal laws for that purpose. The first of these, he held, is established just preceding the winter solstice, when the male youth are gathered back to their family altars for the women's and children's festival of Christmas; the second anticipates the ancient preparation for the vernal equinox in the period of joy and feasting just preceding Lent; while the third, the largest and most successful day of sacrifice, though local in its scope, is also doubtless due to the fixed climatic mutations of the year. I am alluding now to our Pageant, of the Roses, set by wise precedent in the last of May, when the songs of our mocking birds, the blossoms of our Southland and the complexions of our women are at their best, and all alike invite to the immemorial spring feasts and sacrifices of love.

It is upon this last festival at the height of the

mating season that the minds and purposes of our women focus throughout the year. Here is, in fact, the fixed centre of our women's calendar—especially for unusually successful mothers with unusually attractive daughters. For though there is no explicit award in set terms for the best offering of the season, yet there is a very close approximation to this in the choice by old custom of the Empress of the Roses—the main figure of the central *tableau vivant* of that day; and a distinction of this kind, I need not point out to any rational mother, has advantages to any marriageable daughter much more permanent than the assumption of a crown of flowers as the ruler of one May day.

It was in connection with this chief women's festival that I myself observed, as a close witness, the rather remarkable enterprise or speculation in the main business of women, with the details of which I am now about to acquaint you.

In the pageant of 1919 an unusual and unfortunate event took place—from the standpoint of local mothers. The winner of the chief honour of the day was a stranger from out of town—a girl who, it was charged, was brought to Carthage by her mother for the obvious and open purpose of matrimony; and who was soon known, by her critical and hostile contemporaries, as White or

Snowy Shoulders—a name bestowed upon her, I was given to understand, because of the over insistence of her somewhat astonishing mother upon the irresistible charms of that portion of her person. Her real name, or the name given out by her at that time, was Virginia Fairborn.

Women—strange or otherwise—are not at my time of life the subjects of such eager scrutiny as they may have been at some earlier period. I am well by the first sweet expectancies of spring. But, being human, I could scarcely have avoided the observation of this striking girl and her no less striking though very different mother nor, if I had done this, could I have missed the other women's whispering about them from the first moment when the two arrived with their many and houselike trunks and stirred to the depths the exclusive boarding house of Mrs. Tusset, where for many years now I have held my residence.

I heard the other women more or less from the first whispering about them among themselves, "Who are they? Where do they come from?"—as women have always whispered among themselves, I assume, concerning stranger women since before Babylon; especially in socially guarded centres like the boarding house of Mrs. Tusset. In time this whispering usually abates and new feminine alliances take place. But in this case the whisper-

ing, instead of dying, grew louder and more sustained. The two strangers still remained objects of inquiry to the other women—not yet explained, or accepted, or forgiven, probably, for their intrusion.

"Who are they?" grew very soon to "Did you ever see anything like them in your life?" And they stood alone outside, so far as the women—though not the men—could arrange it.

For the girl—that Snowy Shoulders—this was a matter apparently of small concern. From the first she was the still, white, silent, unsocial creature she remained—smiling but never laughing, talking little, sitting much alone—a strange unheard-of thing apparently—a girl dumb and laughless in girlhood. Yet in a way her manner was an added attraction; her indifference, together with her beauty, proved irresistible to the men, who—as any woman will tell you—love to love the mysterious qualities which they themselves invent and place behind the fine eyes of beautiful and silent women.

"She may be handsome, but she never had an idea in her life," I could hear the whispering women passing judgment on her day after day. "She takes no more thought of the morrow than a lily of the field," was one more opinion I remember. "And she has just exactly as much sense."

The mother was just the opposite of the girl—a mystery at the other pole; rosy, where the girl was white—and especially after three o'clock in the afternoon—for she rouged wantonly and abominably; strident, where the girl was still; strange and suspected, not from her silence but her much speaking; insistent beyond all precedent in her breaking into every conversation and her advertising of her wondrous daughter; and known soon and generally behind her back—with that keen concern for the sensibilities of others which prevails in boarding houses—by a name equally as kindly and striking as her daughter's—as the Scarlet Cockatoo.

These then were the two strangers, the two invaders of the matrimonial territory of our own women—the two rakish craft, as old Sam Barsam would have said, who, appearing suddenly, had started poaching, contrary to all women's law, in the still, protected *mare clausum* of the women of Carthage.

I can recall with considerable sharpness and accuracy the information concerning them and their purposes which I received while reading my paper from time to time in the big hall before dinner, from the whispering women who were wont to gather there to exchange the results of their study

of the two—more especially as the date of the Pageant of the Roses was approaching.

"Who are they? Who knows who they are, anyway—any more than on the first day that they came?" one woman would inquire, turning her head in the direction of the stairway, down which the mother and daughter were soon to come to dinner.

"Mrs. Tusset knows—you can bet your life on that," another one would say—that black-eyed, up-and-coming Belle Davis.

"Yes, I know," said a third one— that Mrs. Ella Armitage, the grass widow—called a beauty once herself and spoken of for the beauty prize in her day. "But what can even Mrs. Tusset really know?"

"They're adventuresses—that's all we do know," added Julia Blakelock, the first speaker, again. Though scarcely a candidate herself at this somewhat late hour, she had, I had been informed, a niece who had been mentioned as a possible ruler of the roses.

"No, we don't. We don't know that either," said the positive, downright Belle Davis. "All we know is what they showed Mrs. Tusset—where they came from. They're Fairborns—'from Fairborn Courthouse, Dell County, ma'am,'" she went on, mocking a sharp voice sufficiently familiar now

to all of us. "'From the old Fairborn plantation —the largest with two or three exceptions in old Dell County, ma'am.'"

"Where's Dell County?" inquired the thin-lipped Julia Blakelock. "What's Fairborn Courthouse? Do you know?"

"Yes. Certainly I know," replied Belle Davis.

"When were you ever there?" asked Ella Armitage, surprised.

"I never was. But I know just the same, just what it's like—an old run-down county with a courthouse in a little old run-down town, with two or three spotted pigs in the main road, and a jail, and an old-time country hotel with pillars, and a livery stable where they all put up their horses when they come in from the plantations twice a year, when there's a court session."

"Yes," said Ella Armitage. "I've seen it myself —near enough, anyhow. But how do we know they even come from there?"

"They showed that much to Mrs. Tusset. They must have—to ever get in here, I believe."

"I don't," said Julia Blakelock; "I don't believe anything of the kind."

"Why not?"

"For one mighty good reason."

"What reason's that?"

"Those dresses. That wardrobe of the girl."

I stopped reading now—gave up trying to—and sat there behind my paper drinking in, as Sam Barsam would have said, the quaint, ancient lore of the whispering women's trade secrets—dresses, appearances, little manners—the things the women talk about when they are considering and trying to estimate another member of their craft.

"Well, what of it?" Belle Davis wanted to know.

"They never came from Fairborn Courthouse—nor any other place like you describe. You can make up your mind to that—not those extreme latest dresses on that girl!"

"And yet her mother's did. It's written all over them and her. She's just nothing but a regular old-time small-town Southern belle—all loose ends and ribbons and pink parasol.

"And the girl herself might have come from there too," said Ella Armitage. "Maybe that's why she don't talk any more—to cover that up."

"No," said Belle Davis in that positive, downright way of hers.

"They might have done this," contributed Ella Armitage. Having been a beauty once herself she could, I assume, speak with some authority. "They could have taken her to some good dressmaker——"

"Good dressmaker!" said Julia Blakelock somewhat sniffingly.

"Yes. Good dressmaker!" said Belle Davis.

"They must have cost a small fortune," said Ella Armitage.

"Yes. But who'd wear them?"

"I would—and you would," stated Belle Davis.

"Yes. If we wanted to be conspicuous."

"All I was going to say," said Ella Armitage, going back, "was that they might have taken the girl to some dressmaker in St. Louis or Louisville and given her *carte blanche* to fit her out."

"Some theatrical dressmaker maybe—or something like that," said Belle Davis, nodding.

"Accustomed to getting up women for the stage."

"And told her to go ahead."

"Yes," said Ella Armitage, the author of the theory.

"Oh, you make me tired, with all your mysterious old talk about these people!" said Julia Blakelock. "They never saw Dell County, either of them. She's just a common adventuress with a big, common, striking daughter for sale. It's a case of a girl for sale, that's all. It's written all over both of them. One calls out and auctioneers and the other poses. I've seen hundreds just like them."

"The woman's common enough," said Ella Armitage. "You see her all over the South."

"But there's nothing common about that girl,"

stated Belle Davis. "Don't you fool yourself. I never saw anything like her in all my life. She sits there—day after day—like a girl of ivory."

"Not an idea in her head."

"No. That isn't it."

"Not an expression—not a particle of expression in her face."

"That's more it," said Belle Davis. "That's what I was trying to say."

"What?"

"That it isn't what's there so much that's strange—as what isn't there—what's lacking."

"Brains," suggested Julia Blakelock.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know. I can't tell you exactly. Only it isn't natural—for a girl of that age. I can't explain it exactly. But it's like all the life—all the spring—had gone out of her."

"That's perfectly true," said Ella Armitage, "but what's strange about it?"

"It's terrible, I think," said Belle Davis; "perfectly terrible."

"Terrible?"

"That expression on her face. I sit and study it. Do you know what I think it is sometimes?" Belle Davis asked them.

"What?"

"Fear."

"Fear?"

"Yes—in both of them. But in that girl—that pale-faced girl—especially. Did you ever notice them," she asked—"especially the Cockatoo—just before the postman comes every day?"

"I don't know as I have," said Julia Blakelock.

"I don't know what you mean," said Ella Armitage.

"The one screaming louder and louder."

"And the other one stiller and whiter—like marble. Or getting away out of sight entirely."

"It may be all my imagination," started Belle Davis, "but——"

"Hush! Here they come now," said Julia Blakelock.

And the door upstairs closed and the two strange women were coming down the stairs—the chattering mother first, the white silent daughter following her.

That was the first hint I received—that conversation—of the real situation as it developed.

II

TO the best of my knowledge and belief it was two nights after that when the first of the telegrams arrived; an occasion which I myself witnessed and still can recall with considerable fullness of detail.

It was the night of some species of rehearsal for the now fast approaching pageant. The girl had come out silent and alone from the dining room and sat silent and alone and indifferent to her surroundings in one corner of the room, noticing no one, thinking—of herself, or of nothing at all or of some fearful vision, according as you wanted to believe.

The mother was having what was denoted in the boarding house as one of her "wonderful nights" —screaming with exultation or apprehension or relief or whatever emotion it was that really drove her, and calling attention even more plangently than usual to the wonderful charms of her wonderful child.

The reason for this exalted mood was not unknown or unadvertised to the other women of the house. The girl and her mother were both waiting

for the appearance of young Clayborne Gordon —Captain Gordon now—who was to be the partner or opposite of the girl in the main tableau of that year, the tableau of Victory; and whose personal capture by these invaders of our peaceful matrimonial seas was expected now by competent observers to be announced as a final climax for the two strangers' day of triumph. That interpretation certainly received more or less corroboration from the manner on that particular night of the leader in the matrimonial raid—that so-called Scarlet Cockatoo.

The woman raved on—as the current phrase went—about the girl, in shriller and louder accents, I should have said myself, that night than ever before.

"Isn't she wonderful, ma'am, at that angle?" she inquired in that piercing whisper of the group she was holding up to talk to. "Just as she sits there now? So unconscious of everything—of all of us."

It was scarcely credible to any sane mind that the girl did not hear her, but neither in motion nor in manner did she give the slightest evidence of having done so. She sat—colour, attitude and expression unchanged—looking off in the cold, impassive and almost stupid manner that she had, gazing at another corner of the room, like some

one, I should sometimes have said myself, who had been drugged. It was the one defect in her really remarkable beauty—the lack of any apparent interest or zest in life.

Apparently her mother must have sensed this too.

"Virginia!" she called sharply across the room. "Virginia, isn't Captain Gordon rather late?"

By this I assume she was killing two birds with one stone—announcing for the benefit of the other women the approaching advent of that very desirable young man and stirring her exhibit up to a somewhat needed display of life. You may have seen horse trainers flick blooded horses so, maybe, passing by the judges' stand.

The girl responded at best indifferently.

"I don't know, mother, I am sure," she answered in her slow rich voice, lapsed again into her moody silence and sat there silent until finally her escort came.

Each spring, as Omar Khayyam has, I think, neglected to point out, brings forth its crop of bridegrooms as well as brides; and with us an Emperor—in fact, if not in name—as well as an Empress of the Roses. And Clayborne Gordon, though somewhat hard at times to bear, was unquestionably the Emperor of that May. He had been across at war—"near though not too near

the Front," as was said by our rosy friend, Cupid Calvert, the women's licensed jester, whom our boarding house, like all other boarding houses, possessed. And, returning late, he still wore his uniform with an exaggerated valour and stiffness, which marked him even more than before the Great War from his fellow men. He was, as some one quite rightly said of him, a very Gordon of the very Gordons; born, it might easily be believed, with a slightly lifted nostril, which made him something of an impediment to joy in general social life. Yet after all he was what he was—well born, well connected, well supplied with means by the recent bounteous provision of Nature and war for us Southerners in our war cotton; and they were few and far between who failed to bow down before him.

He greeted the gathering in Mrs. Tusset's hall with a courteous indifference. So doubtless Jupiter might have bowed to villages when in pursuit of some temporarily favoured maid. And the two went together to their rehearsal for the Victory tableau—and the possible greater victory for the Scarlet Cockatoo and her white child, with the parrot's voice of the mother screaming wonderfuls after them like a litany. It was a wonderful night, it seemed, for a wonderful rehearsal for what was to be a wonderful affair, she knew.

"Have a wonderful time!" she screamed after them as they passed through the entrance, and then turned back again to twang still further upon the already twitching nerves of her auditors.

"You just ought to see her in her costume—as Victory," she stated in a general and somewhat ominous silence. "She is simply wonderful, ma'am! Her shoulders—oh, I never saw them so wonderful as they are in that—so snowy white!"

"Stop, ma'am," said Cupid Calvert, jumping up in mock alarm from where he was sitting, "before proceeding any further. Remember there are gentlemen present."

"You may laugh, sir," she told him playfully, relieved no doubt at any answer whatever from the circumambient silence, "but let me tell you that girl has the most wonderful skin in all the world. I am her mother—and I know. Not a blemish—not a blemish anywhere," she announced, including the women in her statement, "on her whole person."

"Pardon me," cried the amuser of the women, starting towards the door and stumbling heavily over his feet, "I must be going, ma'am; it isn't safe for me to stay."

The guarded laugh which followed him cheered on the woman to further efforts in her advertising.

"No," she said to him when he turned back

again grinning his broad and foolish grin. "But truly, all joking aside, isn't she wonderful? Is it any wonder I am so proud and happy, sir, as her mother, after bringing her up and rearing her tenderly all these years myself; and lavishing everything that her heart desired on her—and all that? How can I be anything else but proud to see how it's all come out? How all the men are crazy over her! Just as you were yourself—and are right now!" she ended, touching him on his coat lapel and drawing away.

There was another laugh following this effort—a real laugh, with the genuine, somewhat tart flavour of laughs at a professional laugher. For the career and personal ambitions of Cupid Calvert as a squire of dames, or a fusser, as I understand is the more contemporary expression, were more than a matter of common report; they were a subject of general jest. And no one present had forgotten the ill success of the youth's earlier efforts to awaken the attention of the cold and indifferent girl, nor his silent and somewhat reddened retreat after various specific attacks.

"You know it. You're like all the rest of the men. All of you are just the same," said the mother and exhibitor of Snowy Shoulders, clearly encouraged and emboldened by the rare stimulus of a general appreciation of her conversational

powers and by her opponent's unreadiness of immediate reply. "You simply can't resist her. Oh, I know. I was just like her at her age," she added for heaping good measure. "All admirers and beaux and ribbons and dances. All the wonderful times a real Southern girl has when she's popular. Ain't that just the simple truth?" she asked in a general appeal to the other women.

And just at that moment— the height of exuberance and playfulness—fate, it seemed, chose to strike; and that first telegram arrived. The messenger boy must have passed the golden girl herself as she went down the outside walk with her golden escort; and must have been standing there outside, waiting for the mother to finish her shrill ecstasies, ringing vainly at the bell, for when nobody answered his voice called out through the screen door: "A telegram."

"Who for?"

"Mis' Fairborn. Mis' Leonora Fairborn."

The woman—that Scarlet Cockatoo—whose real name, as I have neglected to state so far, this was supposed at that time to be, stopped talking suddenly, her smile frozen on her painted face, like a scared clown, as Cupid Calvert stated afterward.

After a moment she stepped out and took the telegram herself at the door.

"Sign here," said the boy.

And then, when she had signed with, I thought, a somewhat shaky hand and started to turn away, "It's collect," said the boy.

"Collect!" she said after him, in a voice that was sharp and faint at the same time.

She hadn't the money with her for it. I remember that quite clearly, for I myself loaned her the necessary sum, which she afterward failed to remember to repay.

She settled with the boy with my change and turned away—without opening the yellow envel ope yet.

"Any answer?" the messenger boy asked her.

"Why?" she asked, more shrill than before.

"They told me there might be."

"Wait," she told him. "I'll see."

Her voice sounded still sharper and more apprehensive.

The other women turned themselves away with a somewhat exaggerated and vivacious indifference, talking together, watching her out of the corners of their eyes.

"Have you got a pencil, Judge Dalrymple?" she asked me.

I didn't have one.

"Here's one, lady," said the messenger boy, and handed her the miserable old dirty stub that a messenger boy usually carries.

She took it and went over to the writing desk in the corner. Her telegram was not opened yet.

She was delaying opening it, it seemed to me.

But now she tore it open with a flourish and read it with a fixed and steady smile. And then, after a pause, seeing, I assume, the eyes of the other women on her, she threw back her head and laughed. It was a mistake in judgment, so all the other women agreed afterward. The laugh was too sharp; almost hysterical, I thought myself.

"What's the joke?" called Cupid, looking curiously across the room.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing," she said; and put her telegram in the bosom of her dress and started answering it, planting the blank the boy had given her down on the desk with a decided motion, as though all ready to start, and then putting the point of the pencil to her lips and sitting there, considering.

For a minute—maybe two minutes—she sat there, the soiled stub of the messenger boy at her scarlet lips, a fixed steady smile on her face, but no motion to write. The eyes of the whispering women, who were gathered round a bridge table now, were all the time furtively regarding her, as she doubtless was well aware.

She was unable to write her reply—that was

clear finally; evidently not being able to collect her thoughts.

"Won't the little pretty words come to mamma?" inquired Cupid, pushing in, as usual, as far as advisable.

She broke off her writing and got up—almost with a jerk.

"Let me answer it for you, ma'am," continued Cupid. "Let me do it for you."

"No," she said with hectic gaiety, "I'm going to save money. I'm going to answer this thing by mail."

She gave the messenger back his pencil stub and blank and sent him off. And then, if I remember rightly, she started back across the hall, going toward the stairway.

"You ain't going," asked Cupid Calvert, still pushing her, "without telling us the good news?"

"What news?" she asked back, her voice sharpening again, it appeared to me now, in spite of all she could do.

"What you were laughing at. What made you so terrible mighty happy in your telegram."

"Certainly I'll tell you. Certainly," she answered him with a simple offhand gaiety. "It's just word from another old flame of Virginia's; sending felicitations on her first stage appearance, saying he'd certainly be here on the great day."

"The day of the great victory," said Cupid, grinning with easy significance.

The woman laughed again with that extraordinary half hysteria. And the other women almost stopped talking—at her somewhat striking blunder.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cupid," said Belle Davis, filling in the sudden silence; "always going butting into other folks' business like you do!"

"You don't mind, do you?" Cupid asked the mother of Virginia with a mock languorous look.

By this time the woman had gotten over to the stairway, still wearing her fixed and rigid smile, and stood temporarily with her hand clasping the baluster.

"Oh, no. No, certainly not," she said. "Nothing like that—with you, Cupid! But one thing I wish you would do for me—all of you!" she added, taking in her breath so sharp that it was distinctly noticeable. "I wish you wouldn't speak of this—this message—to Virginia; or allude to it in any way, please. I want the whole thing to be —to be a surprise to her."

"Oh, certainly not, Mrs. Fairborn," the other women told her warmly.

And then she smiled that hectic smile of hers—"bright roses on the withered snow," as Cupid said

concerning her complexion—and passed brightly up the stairs, her step, however, it appeared to me, lagging considerably as she approached the top.

"Collect!" said Belle Davis, almost before the woman's door upstairs was closed. "Felicitations collect!"

"From another old flame," said Julia Blakelock.

"How humouresque!" said Cupid, that being the expression he was most favouring with his preference at that time.

"What a fool!" added Julia Blakelock.

And the women went on then, tearing to pieces the other woman's awkward hurried lie.

"What a fool she is!" said Julia Blakelock again through her thin lips.

"No," said Belle Davis.

"What is she, then?"

"You know what I've been telling you all the time about the postman—how she acted just before he came?"

"What of it?"

"Did you see her hands go when she first took that thing—that telegram?"

"I did," said Mrs. Armitage.

"And how she sat there afterward, with that old pencil in her mouth—like she was a paralysed woman?"

"What of it?" the Blakelock girl asked again.

"That woman's scared to death, that's all," asserted Belle Davis. "So scared she didn't know what she was doing or saying—and don't yet!"

"I think that too," said another one—the quiet little older woman whom Cupid Calvert named the Sibyl—or the Pessimist of Our Boarding House.

"It must have been quite tol'able excitin'," said Cupid, "whatever it was. She must have been expecting something right interestin'. She was shiverin' and shakin' long before she started openin' it."

"A guilty conscience, that's all, probably," asserted Julia Blakelock.

"She was scared, that's all," Belle Davis said again, "from first to last, so she didn't hardly know her name!"

"What do you expect was in that thing—that telegram?" asked Julia Blakelock.

"I wish I knew," said Ella Armitage. "I'd give a right smart piece of money to."

"I certainly would," said Belle Davis.

"You just made up your mind to know, chillun?" inquired Cupid Calvert, who fell easily into negro dialect in his more humourous moods. "Is your mouth just waterin' to find out?"

"Certainly is," said Belle Davis. "Why so?"

"'Cause if you is, honey, here's the boy, maybe, who kin find the way to git it for you; who's got

a special particular means that ev'ybody don' have at his 'sposal."

"Yes, I know," said Belle Davis. "I know it. I know the special means myself. It has yellow hair and peekaboo waists and stands looking out the telegraph-office window all day long, eating on a lead pencil."

"Ne'mind. Ne'mind," said Cupid, who prided himself rather than otherwise, I always claimed, on the diversification of his interests in the fair sex. "Only—you just watch this boy!"

"What do you think, judge?" asked Belle Davis, bringing me into it finally.

"Think—about what?"

"About that telegram. Was she scared or wasn't she?"

"She'd better be, if she isn't now," I said. "With all you whispering women after her—with your trained sleuth hound."

"Our reputation hound, eh, judge?" Belle Davis asked me, laughing.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "You hit it there exactly. That's just the title. They'll never escape you and your reputation hound. He'll run them down before he's finished."

"How humouresque you are, judge," said Cupid Calvert.

III

WHETHER or not the chain of events proceeding from this first telegram might under other circumstances have resulted otherwise and less disastrously for the two women, I am unprepared to state. Yet in few circumstances that I can represent to myself would the hunt that started after them with the coming of that document have been organized so expeditiously and got under way so fast.

"Curiosity," old Sam Barsam used to remark, "is the strongest appetite of the human soul. It lures the budding mind of the infant to its sweet unfolding; it drives the parched and sandy traveller through the tawny wastes of the Sahara. When all else has failed—when teeth are gone and eyesight, and reason totters, and ears threaten to fall off—still curiosity remains unshaken on its throne, a pledge and presage of immortality; and reaches its grandest height in some senile woman in a boarding house."

In any boarding house, he might have said, in my opinion. In any place where woman meets

woman face to face continually under one common roof, observing each other's souls and bodies and complexions in dishabille, curiosity must and will be served—and most especially in an exclusive and careful boarding house like Mrs. Tusset's—in the fierce light which shines upon social centres.

I cannot speak for others, but I felt reasonably assured myself that our smiling friend, Cupid Calvert, would arrive that evening with the contents of that fateful telegram while I sat reading my paper in the hall before dinnertime. No better social retriever could be invented than this jovial young dog. He had, in fact, the so-called social gift, the many opportunities of the jovial for collecting information, and with his special opportunity in this particular case he could scarcely fail to bring back to his waiting friends and patrons, the whispering women, the news matter he could get for them from their sister, that massive blonde with stately figure and gold hair piled up like a great golden pitcher on her head, with whom I had not infrequently myself seen him conversing in the telegraph office.

It was evident to me at least from the mere display of teeth as he came in the door that evening that he had not been unsuccessful in the main business of his day.

"Guess what papa brought you home tonight?"

he asked the waiting group who were there upon his entry.

"We know!" said the lively Belle Davis. "We know!"

And Julia Blakelock came forward, without further or unnecessary remark.

"You never would betray me, would you?" he asked them, chuckling and holding them off. "Cross your heart. You never would let on you heard from me? 'Cause this is serious business, you understand."

"Never. Never. Nobody'll ever know from us!" Belle Davis promised him.

"Well, here it is!" he told them finally. "I went and copied it down my own self." And he brought it out for them to read.

That Belle Davis, being the quickest of the lot, grabbed it first and started reading. Her full round face got red with excitement.

"My good Lord!" she said.

"Read it," said Cupid.

"Go ahead. Read it. Out loud," said Julia Blakelock. And she did.

It ran, to the best of my memory, this way:

"So you should make a get-away? Now you come through. Five hundred—by Saturday. Or letters start. Wire answer. A. G."

"What's this?" asked Ella Armitage.

"A get-away? What's a get-away?" inquired Julia Blakelock.

"It sounds to me like a city slum," said Belle Davis.

"It is, I expect," Cupid Calvert told her.

"A get-away?" asked the Blakelock girl again. "What is it? Tell me."

"Don't pretend you don't know, Julia," Belle Davis told her.

"I don't. Do you?"

"It's just cheap talk for escape, Julia dear," explained Cupid Calvert.

"Escape?" said the Blakelock woman. "Who from?"

"From A. G., probably."

"A. G.?" Belle Davis asked him. "Who's A. G.?"

"You kin search me," said Cupid. "All I know's just what you see—from just right there. A. G.—from St. Louis."

"Is that where it's dated from?" asked Mrs. Armitage.

"See!" said Belle Davis, reading the date line and going over the thing again. "Five hundred —by Saturday! You know what it is, don't you? It's blackmail."

"You might think thataway," said Cupid.

"By some criminal—some low-down creature," stated Julia Blakelock.

"How do you make that out? How do you get all this?" the Davis girl asked her back.

"It's right there, isn't it—plain as day? Just the way that's written."

"Blackmail!" said Ella Armitage, speculating. "What power could a man like that have over them?"

"That's just it," said Belle Davis.

"There's nothing very strange or mysterious about it that I can see," stated the Blakelock woman. "It's just what I said from the beginning. They're just two common adventuresses from St. Louis—that's what they are. Only worse, probably, than we suspected at first. Two creatures from the slums of St. Louis."

"You sure are ridiculous, Julia," said Belle Davis, "when you once get started, ain't you?"

"Not this time, I'm not. I said, and I'll say it again, they never saw Dell County in this world. They're just two common low-down adventuresses from St. Louis."

"I don't believe it," said Belle Davis.

"Why not?"

"I know they're not, that's all. The way they act—the way they are. The girl's dresses might have come from St. Louis; but she never did

—nor her mother. And I don't believe they are that kind—the girl certainly isn't."

"What did they come here for?" asked Ella Armitage, "it—"

"That's easy," Julia Blakelock answered. "Men—for the girl!"

"One will be enough," said Cupid Calvert.

"I'm not so sure about that, either," said the Blakelock woman.

"Don't be a fool, Julia," said Belle Davis, getting red. "They're here to sell off the girl maybe—but no more."

"I believe that," said Ella Armitage.

"And even then the girl don't do her part—even at that. She never runs after the men—you've got to say that."

"She don't have to," said Julia Blakelock. "Her part is to pose—while her mother pulls them in."

And they went back to the telegram again.

"A. G.—that's all you know?" Belle Davis asked Calvert. "Cross your heart?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's all I could find out here," said Calvert.

"No wonder she's restless," observed Belle Davis.

"Who's that?" asked young Calvert all of a sudden, looking in my direction.

"Oh, that's just the judge," Belle Davis said, reassuring him, and came over to me in my corner.

"What do you think, judge?" she asked me.

"Think—about what?"

"Oh, you know well enough! About those two women—the White Shoulders and her mother?"

And she started showing me the telegram.

"Take it away," I said to her. "I don't want to be implicated in this. I can't afford to be when they bring you up before me from the Grand Jury."

"The Grand Jury!" they said after me.

"Yes, ma'am. For going in and stealing messages from the telegraph company. Don't you know that's an indictable offence—or ought to be if it isn't?"

"You're fooling now, judge," said Calvert, with a kind of crooked grin on his face. He wasn't a very stout-hearted animal.

"You'll see," I told him.

"But look, judge!" said Belle Davis, bold and undismayed as ever. "Ain't it right, when you know folks are doing wrong, to try and expose them?"

"All I know is, " I said, "you want to be careful and step kind of light. You might get in trouble yourself!" And I went upstairs and washed my hands for dinner.

However, I knew now about the telegram—like everybody else did; and watched with the rest those two go along with whatever it was hanging over them. The time to their day of victory—as it was now quite commonly called—was growing mighty short. It was on Saturday of that week. And as it came along the strain must have grown pretty strong—especially on the Scarlet Cockatoo.

Every day, it seemed, the contrast between the mother and daughter got sharper and sharper. The mother talked, always louder and more shrill—concerning the old plantation, and the raising and the dressing of the wonderful girl from her beginning, the exceeding great whiteness of her skin, her ribbons, her hats, her French knots upon her baby clothes, the lavishing upon her of all that heart could desire from a child and the wild appreciation of it now by all the men.

And all the time that this was going on—within earshot, to say the least—the girl, White Shoulders, would sit alone, oblivious, indifferent, apparently impervious; thinking her own thoughts—more silent and statuesque than ever.

"Is she an absolute fool?" the Blakelock woman kept asking. "She must know about that telegram—whatever it is there that's driving the mother screaming crazy."

"That's where you're wrong," Belle Davis told her.

"You mean to stand there and tell me that girl don't know about what was in that telegram?"

"That's just exactly what I mean. She meant just what she said—the mother—when she talked to us that night. She don't want the girl to know about that thing."

"Why not?"

"I don't know that, naturally. Unless she might hope she could settle it herself some way—before the great event!"

For it was generally conceded now among the whispering women that the victory day, the Pageant of the Roses, was about to bring out the announcement of the final chapter of the magnificent and self-contained Captain Gordon.

"Somebody ought to tell him," observed Julia Blakelock.

"Who?" asked the Davis girl.

"Clayborne Gordon."

"That's a nice idea. Why don't you?" asked Belle Davis.

"Maybe I will," stated the Blakelock woman, not backing down an inch. "Somebody certainly ought to."

"I hope something will happen soon one way or the other to end this thing and shut that mother up," said little Mrs. Pennyworth, the small

little brown woman whom Cupid Calvert called the Boarding-House Pessimist. "Or we'll go crazy—if she don't."

"She's so happy it hurts," said Cupid.

"Worse than that. It deafens you," said Belle Davis.

"It's just driving me crazy, that's all," said the Pessimist briefly.

And then, right after that, on the third day after the first one, the second telegram arrived. The Cockatoo had evidently done what she said she would—sent on her answer by mail. And the second telegram was in answer to this. It ran something about like this:

"Coming down to look you over. See you later. A. G."

You might almost have known there was some new nervous strain from just sitting listening to the Cockatoo—to her terrific outbursts of joy and laughter.

"Did you ever hear such a noise in your life?" said Belle Davis, looking over across the room where the woman was talking.

"And that girl—what do you suppose she is thinking about? How can you claim she don't know what's going on—those telegrams?" asked Julia Blakelock.

"That would give her more brains than you

claim she's got," Belle Davis answered her—"if she could act out indifference like that."

"Maybe she just thinks it's all part of the coming nuptial noise. The praise service over Clayborne Gordon," observed Ella Armitage.

"She looks worse to me every day," said Cupid Calvert, who had stood studying the mother with that calm brazen look he had when he wasn't grinning. "Even with all that paint on. She looks more like a scared clown than ever."

"She certainly sounds like one," said Belle Davis.

"I wonder what he'll be like when he comes?" asked Ella Armitage.

"Who?"

"A. G."

"What I wonder is, how we'll get to see him."

"Oh, you'll get to see him all right," I told them, chiming in. "Leave that to our friend Cupid. He'll know all about him. Your good old reliable reputation hound will smell him out before the ink's dry on the hotel register."

I left them exchanging speculations as to who the blackmailer might be, what relation he had to the women and what the two had done that he held them with—all the dark and racy possibilities which lurked in the situation—and no doubt several more.

IV

FOR awhile it looked to me as if the Fairborn woman had slipped them; as if in one way or another this A. G.—this blackmailer, as he was then believed to be—might have eluded the other women and their assistant. The preparation with joy and laughter and garlands for the festival—the day of victory—proceeded, the happy clamour of the Scarlet Cockatoo rising above all the rest. And still there was no visible appearance of the mysterious telegrapher from St. Louis.

It was the day before the festival—that evening preceding supper—when I saw finally that something had occurred, from the beaming countenance of our jovial young friend Calvert.

"You're a nice crowd," he was telling the women in the hallway.

"Why?"

"Do you know who was here today?"

"No. Who?"

"He was."

"He—who's he?" cried Belle Davis, all excitement.

He didn't even answer that. He knew she understood.

"Right here under your noses," he told her.

"Who?" she asked again.

"Here—take a look at this!" he said, and brought out that printed card, which they showed me afterward:

A. GLUBER
183 N—St.,
St. Louis, Mo.

COSTUMES EASY PAYMENTS

"For heaven's sake! A dressmaker!" said Belle Davis, and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to stop her laughing.

"A. Gluber. Costumes. Easy payments," the Blakelock woman read over slowly.

"Weren't we the burbling boobs," asked Cupid, "not to get it before?"

"The mysterious blackmailer," said Belle Davis. "Ain't that the screamingest!"

"And that's all it was," said Julia Blakelock in a little small voice like she was disappointed. "A dressmaker!"

"Isn't that enough?" asked Ella Armitage. "Isn't that enough?"

"No," said Cupid, "not for Julia. She was looking for some real revelations."

"There might be some yet," suggested Belle Davis.

"Some what?"

"Revelations. Supposing they hadn't paid for them—all their instalments."

"Which is just what they haven't done, probably," said the Blakelock woman.

"And supposing he went and took them all away!"

"And left her——"

"Without!"

"Oh, that would be terrible!"

"You'd think so," stated Belle Davis, "if somebody came and took all your clothes away—the day before what you'd planned for for weeks—to show yourself—at the announcement of your engagement."

"It would be funny, wouldn't it?"

"Pardon me?" asked Calvert, making up a face like he was shocked. "What?"

"If they took all that stuff back and left her just a few old duds."

"What a crab you are, Julia," said Belle Davis to her with her usual frankness.

And then they started questioning Calvert.

"Did you see him?"

"Who?" he asked them, pretending not to understand.

"That dressmaker!"

"No. Not yet."

"Then how'd you get this?"

"Ne'mind. Ne'mind," he said, making a mystery of it.

What he had done, it came out afterward, was to bribe the second girl, that coffee-coloured negress, Lucy, and she had managed when she got the card at the front door to keep it for him and just announce the name to the Fairborn woman.

"Do you know, I heard her! I heard her go down myself," said Ella Armitage, "now you speak of it!"

"And White Shoulders?"

"She wasn't here, I don't think," said Belle Davis. "I'm pretty mighty certain she was out all this afternoon over to the pageant grounds. She just came in here a little while ago. Clayborne Gordon brought her over."

"So she doesn't know anything yet," said Mrs. Armitage.

"So you say!" said Julia Blakelock.

"We'll see anyhow—at dinnertime."

"It certainly will be funny," said the Blakelock woman.

The other woman—that Scarlet Cockatoo—would have been surprised in spite of her long experience if she had realized that night how many

eyes were studying her—and with what intimate knowledge of her affairs.

"It's all over," Belle Davis was claiming when I heard the whispering women comparing notes in the hallway after dinner. "You'll have no amusement tomorrow, Julia. Your day is ruined."

"Ruined?"

"She's fixed it up with the dressmaker."

"How do you know?"

"How can you help knowing—from her voice. From that laugh—from just the look on her face."

She confirmed what I had thought myself. The girl was just as usual. The hectic joy of the mother had abated to what it was before the coming of the first mysterious telegram.

"How would she fix it up?" asked Julia Blakelock, still grudging and disputing.

"How could she help it—when she had shown the dressmaker about tomorrow—the day of victory—and the announcement that Clayborne Gordon is to pay her bills from this time forth?"

"Is that funny or not?" inquired Cupid Calvert, grinning his blandest, most vacant grin. "You talk about paying the bills for your own hanging!"

"Somebody ought to tell him," said Julia Blake-

lock. "That's all. Before he falls into the hands of those two imposters."

"I won't," said Cupid. "I love him too much!"

"There won't anybody," said Belle. "For just that same reason."

It was the general belief among the women that night that everything would go through that next day, that day of victory, for the mother and daughter, exactly as was now commonly understood to be the program—first the tableau of Victory, the crowning of the Empress of the Roses and then the formal announcement of the surrender and capture of Captain Gordon.

What did occur of course, though logical enough, was due just to a chapter of accidents.

V

THE Pageant of the Roses of that year took place—as it had in many others—at Bellevoir, the estate of our Colonel Robert Bragdon. I was there, together with all the other residents of the town, with but few and trifling exceptions. I sat well back in the temporary amphitheater, which was erected as usual under the trees on the natural slope of the so-called grotto.

At two-twenty-five, just five minutes before the exercises were supposed to begin, I observed for the first time the short squat man in striped clothes three seats ahead of me. Cupid Calvert going by called my attention to him.

"Did you get a good look at him?" he asked me.

"Who?" I inquired back.

"A. Gluber, of St. Louis."

"Who—that?" I said. "A dressmaker!"

"Yes. The one with the ears."

"He looks like there might have been toads in his ancestry," I told him.

"You see a lot of them like that," he said, "in the cities—in certain parts. Dressed up like that too."

"I expect you do," I said, "if you frequent those parts!"

"They've all seen him now. They're all talking him over. They're all wise," he said, "about the instalment dressmaker and his bill."

"Trust you," I told him.

He grinned like I had given him a compliment.

"All but Gordon," he said.

"It's an undying wonder to me," I told him, "that you haven't let him know."

"Damn Gordon!" he said, grinning a little sour grin. "Let him have her. He deserves her." And he went on to pass along the good news to others, I presume.

I could hear over the heads of the crowd the Scarlet Cockatoo laughing, apparently in fine feather. She couldn't see and didn't know, it seems, that the man was there, nor suspect the whispering that was going on behind her. And then just before the thing began I heard that Child of Hell of Cole Hawkins come up the drive, barking like a great dog, and stop—shut off suddenly, the way he ran it.

"He'll kill somebody with that machine yet," said my neighbour just beyond me, looking back.

Then just before the thing started the boy came and flung himself into the seat beside me, his face and neck red from hurrying. He had been drinking again; I saw that. He would have liquor, law

or no law; more, it seemed—like some others—since the law was on than before.

"Hello," he said to me in that hoarse voice he had when he was that way.

"Hello, Cole," I told him. And then the thing started.

"I came late," he explained in an overloud whisper, "so's to miss the cackling."

He had the reputation of a woman hater, especially since he came back after his big disappointment, his accident on the aviation field and his grudge against the world in general. "The squawking sex," he called them; "the cacklers," and got out of the way and avoided them whenever possible.

"Hush up!" I told him. "They're starting in."

The spring festival of love and matrimony was under way once again—the new crop of marriageable or almost marriageable daughters displayed on the raised platform in the latest spring styles of dress and posture. The mothers, with their best hats and stiffest smiles and dresses, watched—principally their own offspring—from below; all making a curious and diverting study, as old Judge Pendleton used to say about the affair, for a traveller from the antipodes—like all our tribal customs dealing with matrimony.

The great change was accomplished, which our portion of the race demands—the lengthening of

the skirt, the raising of the hair; all the set tribal advertisements that the noisy natural happy human child has now been broken for the bonds of matrimony. But even more wonderful than this, our traveller would observe, was the firm stoical unconsciousness in the manners and the faces of both the exhibitors and the exhibited of the real and critical significance of this chief and most trying ordeal of a woman's life—of the great main question of whether or not in the scant half dozen years the new offering would be taken.

The Rose Pageant we were watching was no different from those in other years, except for its chief keynote, the military note, a note common enough in that year, I assume, all over our land—as could be expected, especially when the well-known piquancy which war costumes give to young women's charms is considered.

Beginning with the younger and less practised, then, the celebration moved always forward, with, let us say, an increasing and cumulative display of charm, the military motive furnishing a contrast of exceptional success in the method of exhibit—beauty in armour—soft, fragile flesh encased in hard forbidding steel—a masquerade attractive to mankind since the first legend of the Amazons and the grand old red-headed goddesses of Scandinavia.

The enthusiasm arose then step by step as the

height and closing tableau approached—the climax of the day of victory; and the hour drew near for the chief heroine of our national victory and that spring—the final triumph of the girl, White Shoulders.

A hush came as she appeared, followed by the murmur which is the inarticulate voice a human crowd gives to its emotions. The girl was certainly wonderful—all that her mother had claimed, and more.

She was Victory, panoplied and crested—Victory in flesh and blood. Straight-gowned below, steel-helmeted above, a spear and shield in her hand and on her arm—one white shoulder deeply bared. Athena, of the ancient Greeks, had no more triumphant or warlike beauty than this strange, silent, suspected girl when she first appeared. Even the women murmured their approval. She was Victory herself as she moved forward. Even the man beside me, the hater of women, was stirred.

"She's a looker, ain't she?" said Cole Hawkins to me in a loud stage whisper.

"Shut up, Cole!" I told him.

It was planned, as I learned afterward, that Clayborne Gordon, as the triumphant hero, and garbed also in Grecian costume, should approach from the other side of the sylvan platform and be in some way suitably rewarded by the goddess for

his valor. He started out when Victory had established her final pose; all necks were craned.

There was another murmur—of a different kind; another statement of mass emotion by the audience.

"What's this?" said Cole Hawkins, half aloud, from beside me.

Victory had lost her pose, had turned half around, was looking with dilated eyes at a place in the audience.

I straightened up and saw the man myself—his striped coat, his flashing necktie pin—as he raised his short fat body from his chair to stare at her.

"No! No! No! I can't! I can't! Not again!" cried Victory, in the voice of a half frenzied child.

And she crashed down upon her armour, her helmet rolling from her black hair, her wonderful bare white shoulder scratched and bleeding from her fall upon her shield.

The words were perfectly distinct in the silence —were heard and remembered by at least a dozen I spoke to.

And following that, by a fraction of a second, rose the well-remembered voice of the Scarlet Cockatoo: "Virginia! Virginia! My baby!"

She was up on the stage before Captain Gordon and the rest of them had taken her Victory, her baby, to the anteroom.

"Did you see that?" asked Cole Hawkins beside me—his face redder than red against his dead-black hair. "That man she was looking at. What the hell's going on here?"

The whole place was buzzing with the knowledge that was so well disseminated now—concerning the strange dressmaker. The man sat there, brazen-faced, like his kind are, bluffing it out, waiting for developments, rather pleased than otherwise at the attention he was receiving. I told my young friend Hawkins about him—what I knew—in a word or two.

"Is that so?" he said, with the ugly, insolent, lingering emphasis upon the last word that's liable in men of just his kind to come before some ugly action. And before I knew it he was on his feet, out of his seat by the aisle beside me.

"Cole," I said, "come back here!" I knew naturally what he was capable of.

But he went straight up the aisle in silence.

In back of the flimsy dressing room you could hear the voice of the Scarlet Cockatoo calling.

"My child! My child! Virginia! Virginia—wake up! It's all right. It's all right."

The black-eyed, black-haired boy walked up the aisle, with the little lameness from his accident showing in his slow gait. He stood there by the side of the stranger with the striped coat and the diamond horse-shoe in his tie.

"Stand up," he said in a thick low voice, with his big hand on the man's shoulder.

It was an outrageous thing, on the face of it. Several of the men sprang up, looking for trouble.

"Sit down," said Cole Hawkins in a low voice. "This is my funeral."

They sat down.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked the stranger, turning a dark and rather puffy face up at him.

"Stand up—didn't I tell you?" said Cole Hawkins; and dragged him by main strength from the chair.

"Cole, you fool!" I said, taking him by the elbow. But he shook me off.

"Who do you think you are?" inquired A. Gluber, staring at him. He was quite a strong looking man, for a dressmaker. They are, quite often, I understand. But he didn't use strength if he had it, preferring apparently to reply on his voice and ugly look. "Who do you think you are?" he inquired again trying to stare Hawkins down.

"I'm the man that's here telling you about the train service."

"Yeah?" said A. Gluber, his stare still firm, but with no physical action yet.

"I came to tell you," said Cole, still in a low voice, staring back into his small dull eyes,

"there's a train goes up north in just about an hour from now."

"Well, what of it?" asked the man.

"That's the one you're going on."

"I am, huh? Why am I?"

"Because I don't want you here in town."

"Is that right? Why?"

"I don't like your face, that's why. That's all. Come on now."

Instead of another rough reply the man gave out a sudden oath now. Hawkins had closed his hand upon his arm.

Several of the women gave little cries. But the talk was low; no one could hear what was going on, exactly, but those of us who stood near them.

"Now, lemme tell you something," said Cole Hawkins. "I ain't going to urge you. But lemme tell you something. I don't like your face —but I'm telling you this just for your own good. Your going on the five o'clock train—or at five-fifteen the angels will have a new dressmaker working for them. Come now," he said, "come on over to the hotel. We've just got about time."

A. Gluber looked round once or twice at the other faces near him for moral support—but didn't get much.

"This ain't right," I did say to Cole, but he shook me off once more. And they went out.

"You don't want to fool with him," said the man

beside me, "When he's like that. You know what he's done two or three times already. Besides, I didn't care much for that fellow's looks myself."

"Some doin's, judge. Some doin's," said a voice back of me, and I turned and saw Cupid Calvert grinning. "Quite some day of victory!"

"What are they doing with the girl?" I asked him.

"She's come to all right. They're taking her and the Cockatoo over home in a machine."

"I didn't hear the mother," I said, "after the first."

"No," he told me. "Wonderful thing, judge. She's gone silent—for a minute or two."

"It rather postpones," I said, remembering, "the announcement of that engagement."

"Postpones!" he said. "Have you seen Gordon's face?"

"No."

"It's just starting to sink in—the meaning of it all. He'll get it all before night."

"I'll bet on that," I said, looking at him.

"No more days of victory like this—for me," said Cupid, pretending to be wiping the perspiration off his face with his handkerchief. "It's too much for my frail condition, judge."

I went over to my office and sat there and smoked and tried to work the evidence in the thing over in my own mind, while the general populace

went home talking and whispering about it.

I could understand in the first place that I had seen a curious thing—a climax, and undoubtedly, as it looked then, the collapse of a woman's campaign; a strange, unusual speculation in matrimony by these two strange figures—mother and daughter—if that was what they really were. For we were all at sea now.

They were adventuresses most likely, and financed, we might conjecture, in their enterprise by this fat dressmaker with the bloated face. But there were many things not so simply explainable by this theory. Who were they? Were they city women, or what they looked—country women with city clothes? If so what was their relation to A. Gluber, dressmaker or costumer? Why the mother's noisy consternation at her telegram? And why, above all, the white girl's sudden panic terror when she saw that face in the audience and pushed out her arms, palms outward, like a child warding off a haunting danger in the dark, and cried out: "No! No! No! I can't! I can't Not again!"

The whole thing brought up many conjectures, which to my mind were far from being solved by the assumption of a debt to a dressmaker. How, for example, would that explain the girl's outcry —the words of it: "I can't! Not again!"

VI

IT WAS between sessions with me. The day after the Rose Pageant, about three o'clock, I was once again in my office in the Beauregard Block when the door opened and there was Cole Hawkins.

"Well," I said to him, "you certainly made a fine public scene scaring that dressmaker out of town."

"Maybe I did."

"What was your idea?" I asked him. "What started you?"

"I told you, didn't I? I didn't like the looks of his face."

"You'll kill somebody in this town," I said, "before you get through. It's God's mercy you haven't already, in some of the things you've been mixed up in," I told him. For he had broken up one or two men already something scandalous. "When are you going to let the liquor alone," I asked him, "and stop being the town devil?"

"Look here, judge," he said, giving me that black devil-may-care stare of his and not answer-

ing me, "what are these cackling women here trying to do to that girl?"

I told him as much as I knew about the story, the situation about that dressmaker, as we understood it at that time.

"Since when," he wanted to know, "has it been made a crime in this state to owe money to a dressmaker—a damned tailor? There'd be several of them in jail right along—if that was law," he told me.

"There's some truth in that," I told him. "But you've got to remember," I said, "they haven't proved even the dressmaker's bill against her yet. It's all conjecture and guessing still."

. "And lying cackling gossip! But that'll be enough and plenty for the women."

"Cole," I said, "you don't always talk so respectful about what you should—the women especially."

"I'm sorry for that girl," he said, going along his own line of thought as usual, "with everybody after her. You heard the news, didn't you? What they're saying this morning?" he asked me.

"No, sir. I don't know's I have."

"Clayborne Gordon, they say, is leaving town today; called off sudden on a business trip. You know what that means."

"I expect I can guess."

"He's quit her already. He always was a yellow-bellied pup."

"That ain't the language of the polite drawing-room, Cole," I told him.

"Who said it was?" he asked me back. "You know what I'm going to do," he asked me after a little bit, "if he's really gone? I'm going to give her a good time myself, if she'll let me. I'll give her a chance to show these screechers she ain't out of a man, if she wants one."

I grinned a secret grin at that. And yet it was just like him too.

"They'll be getting after you pretty quick—and your character, Cole," I said. "What'll all your fine friends and relations say—for you to start beauing this strange girl round?" I asked him. For in spite of his rough talk he belonged to one of the first families in our county.

"To hell with all of them," he said. "And all the women in this little mean-spirited town. I'd do it for nothing else than to spite them. I hate the whole squawking back-biting lot of them."

"Yes, I know you do," I said, grinning at him. "But how'd you go about it? How would you amuse a girl?"

"I could give her some excitement anyhow," he told me. "That's more than Gordon could do—to anybody. I could give her a ride or two in the old Child of Hell."

"You don't expect," I asked him, "for a minute that you'd get any woman in her right senses to ride out with you in that murder car?"

"Well, she don't have to. If she don't want to all she's got to do is to say so," he told me, and he went out and shut the door after him.

I had to smile a small fraction of a smile after seeing him watching and defending the girl the day before, without the slightest provocation: and yet I knew it wasn't just the looks of the girl, her beauty, either. He was always that way, a generous great-hearted type of boy, from the time he got into long pants; always willing and ready to fight for anybody or anything that he believed was getting worsted—and more than ever since that trouble of his own. In spite of all they said about Cole, I always liked the boy and was sorry for him; and more than ever since that great disappointment he had had, that accident at the beginning of the war.

In war, I always held, the first line out are the natural fighters—the ones who are really looking to fight. There's always a certain percentage of roving foot-loose, devil-may-care boys who just jump at war as the one great big adventure. It was just the same with us in this war as in the old Civil War—young boys begging and cheating and lying to the Government to get out and get shot to death. This Cole Hawkins was one of that kind

always—a natural-born, reckless, devil-take-the-hindmost, harum-scarum fighter.

He was a double orphan, with all the money that was good for him and a little more. One of the kind that always go in for speed. For horses, it was, in my day—fast horses—but now it's gasoline. Ever since the automobile came he had been round breaking speed laws in one. So the first thing he did, naturally, when war came, was to go in for this aëroplane flying—death not being sure and certain enough on the ground. He was especially suited for it, they claimed—too good, too anxious and reckless. One day, as they explained it, he stole in and got out his machine against orders—before he'd hardly learned to run it—and he was down on the ground again, it seems, about as soon as he was up; through with flying and all other warlike pursuits—one leg shorter than the other, and lucky to get off—after months spent in the hospital—with his life.

Since then he had been drinking too much, to put it plain and bald; driving in that big red car of his, that Child of Hell, that he had bought himself; staying by himself and reading the newspapers on the war; and getting blacker and uglier and louder, sitting at home, nursing his wrath, like natural fighters have when they can't get into a fight—ever since the days of Achilles. He got

worse and worse as the war went on without his assistance; every battle fought was a personal insult to him because he wasn't in it. He was a public menace to the town, riding round in that roaring speedster, half drunk very likely, trying to forget that way.

He was right—I believed then and as it finally turned out—in what he had said about Gordon, and what he had thought about him and the girl. Gordon was gone, nobody knew for how long or how far. He had not committed himself publicly to any engagement to the girl, no matter what might have been agreed between them for announcement on that day of victory.

Anyhow, whatever your theory might be, the fact was that the situation was entirely changed. Almost at once Gordon was gone, and the girl, White Shoulders, whiter faced and stiller yet, was taking her first ride with Cole Hawkins, the Lame Duck, as Cupid Calvert kindly called him, but only occasionally, to a select few, not desiring, I assume, that appropriate and kindly name to get back to its bearer as originating from his lips. Yet if you are a humourist, I often notice, humour will out—regardless of consequences.

"She must be desperate, I'll say that for her," said Julia Blakelock, "to go out in that death trap with that drunken murderer."

"Without even taking out a death warrant," said Cupid.

"Let me tell you something, Cupid," said Belle Davis, "Cole Hawkins can drive better drunk and asleep than you ever will with all your faculties. I only wish he'd ask me to ride—but he never will, I expect. I've given up all hope now!"

"Speak for yourself," said Julia Blakelock.

"I will. Don't you fret."

"I don't want to die yet awhile," said the Blakelock woman. "But at the same time you can't blame her, either. It was a godsend to her, after that exposé—after that scandalous thing about the dressmaker. If it wasn't for this new man they'd both have been laughed out of town the next day after the day of victory."

"It was a bitter end to a hard-fought campaign," said Ella Armitage.

"It was a rout, I should say," Cupid Calvert contributed, "with just one avenue of escape."

"A poor avenue," said Julia Blakelock. "You know as well as I do how likely that devil of a Cole Hawkins is to marry her or any other woman. And how long they could live together if he did. But what I don't see," said Julia Blakelock, going on, "is how those two can stay here at all—after what's happened."

"Why not?" Belle Davis asked her.

"After what has come out?"

"What has come out? What do you know?"

"We're practically certain," said the Blakelock woman, "that they were just two adventuresses who came up here to marry off the girl, with a wardrobe they'd bought on instalments from that terrible creature from St. Louis, who came up here looking for his money.

"How do we know even that?" asked Belle Davis again.

"We know it—practically speaking," the other woman told her.

"We don't know a thing that we can prove," repeated Belle Davis, "except a stolen telegram and a stolen business card—and what we saw of this man."

"Wasn't that enough?"

"No. We know there's something very strange—very funny there. But that's all we do know."

"It was enough for Clayborne Gordon, evidently," said Julia Blakelock.

"We don't know that either," Belle Davis insisted. "For all you know he's gone away on a business trip—as he says."

"We can guess," said the Blakelock girl.

"Yes. That's all you can do—about the whole thing."

"There's one thing sure, anyhow," said the

other woman, "and that's the reception they're getting everywhere since the thing happened."

"I'm not so sure about that either—as far as I'm concerned!" Belle Davis told her, snapping her black eyes. "I'm sorry for them, myself, and especially for the girl. She looks more like a girl of ivory than ever—stiller and whiter. And her face has got that kind of haunted look on it, deeper than ever."

"That's one grand idea! Haunted by a dressmaker!" said Cupid Calvert.

"What do you think, judge," Belle Davis came out suddenly at me, "sitting over there, wiser than a barrelful of old owls, listening?"

"They're haunted, I expect, all right, Belle," I told her, "with you all after them. They've got that look. They look to me now like two lost souls, as old Sam Barsam used to say; just two short hops ahead of the devil."

"That's what the Cockatoo sounds like, anyhow, since the unfortunate event."

"Her gaiety does grow," I said, "a little excruciating, I'll have to say."

"Clayborne Gordon may come back," remarked Mrs. Pennyworth, the Boarding-House Pessimist.

"Or they may be getting ready for a good old breach-of-promise suit," suggested Julia Blakelock.

"More business for you, judge," said Calvert.

"I believe we had all better shut up and keep still till we know more," said Belle Davis, who was taking the girl's part more and more now she was down.

The exact fact was that there was nothing in the testimony yet sufficient to warrant more than a general arraignment in the women's courts of the two women as suspicious characters, which they had been all along. On the other hand, there was something more to the point now in evidence—a warning to the men, especially to a man of Clayborne Gordon's finer sensibilities; and so the probability that the women were right in their belief that we were witnessing the last stages of the matrimonial campaign.

The appearance and manner of the Scarlet Cockatoo were the best evidence of this. Her rouge was redder than sin, but not red enough to cover up the purple circles round the eyes; and her gaiety, aimed at those who would still listen to it, was more hysterical than ever. She was directing attention mostly now to the delicacy of White Shoulders in her speech since that unfortunate indisposition on that dreadful day—that terrible happening.

She reverted in detail to this—how natural it was, after all, in a girl who had been so delicately

reared, so sheltered from everything that would disturb a sensitive nature. She was discussing this that night before her next misfortune fell.

"What can you expect, sir," she was saying to me, "when you care for them and shelter them the way we Southern folks do?"

She might be an imposter from St. Louis, I said to myself, watching her and listening to her, but she did not sound like it; she talked like the genuine old-time Southern country woman.

And then she went upstairs to get ready for dinner again. And just precisely at that minute Cupid Calvert was coming in grinning. I saw him enter.

"Come over here," he called in a low voice, and cocked his finger at Belle Davis and grinned a kind of secret way. "Come over here," he said, "in the corner. I've got something to show you."

"The judge won't mind," said Belle Davis, and came over and sat on the arm of my easy-chair.

"It's the opening of the second act, dear friends," said Calvert, and brought out that typewritten letter.

"What's this?" Belle Davis asked him, with her eyes out on her cheek after reading it.

"Read it to Julia," said Cupid, "before she blows up entirely."

So she did.

"Just a word," it said, "to a wise boy. If you're looking around for amusement, ask that woman that calls herself Mrs. Fairborn if she ever heard of the Pitman family—the celebrated Pitman murder case."

"Murder!" whispered Julia Blakelock.

"It isn't signed?" asked Belle Davis.

"No. Nor dated."

"Just typewritten."

"The plot curdles," said Calvert, grinning one of his happiest grins, from ear to ear.

"Just an anonymous letter," said the Davis girl. "I don't believe it."

"Don't you understand yet?" Calvert asked them. And the two looked at him.

"You're slow," he said.

"Oh," said Belle Davis, flushing up. "The telegram!"

"Certain sure. Don't you remember? What we couldn't understand at that time?"

"How was it it ran? I forget," said Belle Davis.

"Like this," he told her, taking it out of his pocket once more and reading it: "So you should make a get-away? Now you come through. Five hundred—by Saturday. Or letters start. Wire answer. A. G."

"Letters start!" said Julia Blakelock, nodding her head. They were all naturally talking in half whispers.

"That dressmaker!" said Belle Davis.

"Look," said Cupid, and turned the envelope of the anonymous letter so they saw the postmark.

"St. Louis!" said Julia Blakelock, reading.

"And if he wrote it," Calvert went on, "there's probably something somewhere behind it."

"Do you mean to say you think they are murderers," asked Belle Davis—"those two women?"

"Well, no. They wouldn't have to be, would they, to be mixed up in it some way?"

"Did you talk to him?" asked Belle Davis, eying him a little close.

"No; only just for a minute," Cupid Calvert told her, his eyes turning off from hers the way they did sometimes.

"Long enough so you exchanged names?"

"Why, yes, I expect so. I expect we did. We would."

"What'd you ask him? What'd you talk about?"

"Oh, nothing," he told her. "We just passed the time of the day. Honest—that's all we did!" he swore to her.

"Murder!" said Julia Blakelock under her breath.

"Look, judge," said Cupid, handing the thing to me. "Here's something in your line."

"Not yet. Not anonymous letters," I said, looking it over and passing it back.

"Did you ever hear of any Pitman murder case?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge and belief," I told him.

"He wouldn't," said Belle Davis. "Not if it was committed in Dell County, in another state."

"Which it wasn't," said Julia Blakelock.

"I'm not so sure about that," Belle Davis answered.

"Why? What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know," she told them. "I just feel thataway somehow."

Julia Blakelock stood still, her thin lips closed down, reading over the letter from where she had taken it from Calvert.

"Who'll do it?" she came out finally.

"Who'll do what?"

"Who's going to ask them that?"

"You mean to say," Belle Davis cried, "you'd have the nerve?"

"I certainly do," stated the Blakelock woman, setting her lips together tighter than ever.

"It would be good and amusing, that's sure," said Cupid.

"It would be more than amusing," said Julia Blakelock. "If we've got that kind of characters here we want to find it out and run them out."

"What characters?" Belle Davis asked her.

"That's what we're going to see," said Julia Blakelock.

"You wouldn't——"

"I certainly would! And I will," said Julia Blakelock—"and right off!"

"I should say, perhaps——" I started telling her.

"Never mind what you say," she told me. "I'm old enough to take care of myself and do what I think is right. You watch me."

We did, naturally. That's all we could do; we waited and watched and saw the blow starting to fall, if it was to be a blow!

The mother and daughter came down the stairs in the usual order—the mother chattering gay nothings to her daughter, following her, apparently not even hearing her; just coming with her eyes down, silent and white and even delicate looking now, in spite of her size. There was a new way about her since her "unfortunate indisposition" on Victory Day; there was weariness and silence and a certain look of shrinking, as if, I thought sometimes, she felt some one was going to

strike her—or worse. Her great eyes were certainly wider and her skin whiter than ever before.

They sat down in the dining room, Julia Blakelock watching them under her eyelids from her seat across the table, waiting for the proper time for her attack. The second course was almost over before she launched it.

"Oh, Mrs. Fairborn," she said in that sweet, high, dangerous voice that women use in verbal warfare.

The Cockatoo looked up. She would, naturally. The other woman almost never spoke to her.

"I almost forgot," the Blakelock girl was going on, with her sharp eyes looking across above her smile. "I had a friend from your state I was writing to about you the other day——"

"Yes, ma'am," said the Fairborn woman, waiting in anxious silence. I could see the girl, that White Shoulders, stop eating and stiffen in her chair.

"And she told me," went on Julia Blakelock, as sweetly as she could in that thin voice of hers, "to ask you if you ever knew a Pitman family in your county—Dell County, isn't it?"

I saw the girl's hand go out, fumbling for her water glass, and the frozen smile freeze harder than ever on the face of the Cockatoo—as full of

mirth as the smile of a mummy.

"Oh, yes," she said after a second. "There was a family of that name there. But I didn't know them—not well."

"Wasn't there something," asked Julia Blakelock, "about a trial? I didn't quite understand it."

The Cockatoo, her eyes set on her face, her mouth in a crescent-shape grimace, jumped out her answer at once—almost before the words had left her mouth. She had courage anyhow.

"There was something—something," she said. "But I forget now just what it was. I was away visiting at the time. I'm afraid I can't tell you," she said, keeping on. "I'm sorry, but I never pay much attention to such things.

And just then the girl's hand, fumbling, knocked over her glass of water.

Belle Davis, on the other side of her, jumped up.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry! I'm terribly mad at myself for that," she said. "I must have hit your arm."

The lips of White Shoulders moved in some sort of murmur. And everybody—the women on both sides of her—were busy mopping up the water.

After they were through and the usual apology and small excitement over such an accident were

done, the meal went through in silence. And after it both the mother and daughter got up and went up to their room.

"I'm afraid Virginia spilled some of that water on her frock. I'm afraid it will stain. I'm going to have her go up and take it off anyhow," the mother volunteered, and they went upstairs together.

"Did you see that girl—how she ate the rest of the meal?" asked Julia Blakelock.

"She was as free and natural in all her motions as the cuckoo on a cuckoo clock!" said Cupid.

"Do you know what that woman was doing to her when Julia was talking?" asked Belle Davis. "She was pinching her under the table.

"Why should you break in," asked Julia Blakelock back—"before we saw what she'd do?"

"We saw enough," Belle Davis told her, "as it was."

"They're certainly guilty," said the Blakelock woman. "It was written all over them."

"Guilty of what?" Belle Davis asked her in that blunt way of hers. "Of murder?"

"What would you say, judge?" Cupid Calvert asked me.

"I doubt if they have committed more than two or three murders at most," I told him. "It wouldn't seem likely to me—if they had killed too

many—we'd see them wandering round at large."

"You needn't tell me," said Belle Davis, "that they are murderers or criminals—especially that girl. She looks to me like a great frightened child. That's what she looks like to me."

"Well, they look very different to me, I can tell you that!" said Julia Blakelock. "And they always have!"

"We'll have to look into this case further, eh, judge?" said Cupid Calvert.

"You will," I said. "It'll be quite a field for your talents."

Neither of the women came down again into the hall that night—at least I didn't see them before I went up to bed.

VII

I WENT to my room that night rather late, as usual. A boarding house bedroom is not, I have always held, a place to heighten the spirits of men well along in life who have the misfortune to be alone in the world. I always preferred to cultivate my leisure either in my office or with the folks downstairs.

It must have been, as nearly as I can place it, about eleven o'clock when I went into my chamber and lit up the gas—the old house not being equipped yet with electricity. When I had done this I was more or less surprised to hear the loudness of the voices in the next room.

The room next adjoining mine I had understood was that of the girl White Shoulders—her Beauty Chamber, as her mother, with her unusual gift of language, called it. The mother, I had understood, slept by herself in a second smaller room beyond and leading out of this. But now when I entered my room she was evidently in the girl's larger bedroom talking. At the side of my bed-

room, away from the hall—used before the somewhat rambling old dwelling was a boarding house—was a door which had been built to connect my room with the chamber now occupied by the girl; a door now bolted on both sides and covered on my side, at least, by a drapery. The women must have been sitting somewhere not far from this.

The indistinct murmur of voices from the next room—such as is often heard through bedroom walls—was familiar enough to me. I had even distinguished words before then spoken by persons near that old door. But that night I was surprised at the distinctness of the two women's voices.

They had talked little in the room when they were once alone together, and then generally in low tones—especially the girl. But now I noticed it was the girl who was speaking loudest—in a strained, hoarse, hurried voice, which, in fact, I took at first to be the voice of a stranger. It was the voice, I then came to the conclusion, of a person under great excitement. And as I listened I could tell from occasional words that she was refusing to do something, in a voice that was more and more hysterical.

I undressed and went to bed, thinking that they would soon stop talking; but in the dark and with the ceasing of noises about the house and in the

street the voices grew louder and more plain—perhaps because the women moved even nearer to that door. But more than all now, both women, I should have said, were losing their heads, in the growth of their excitement, whatever it might be. I moved as noisily as I could, lay down heavily in bed, to give them warning, but now as I lay there I could hear with great distinctness those two strained voices of women beyond the door.

The voice of the mother rose again sharper and clearer than before. I could hear her perfectly—arguing, apparently, with the girl.

"I've told you, and I've told you, and I've told you, Virginia!" she repeated. "We can't! We're down to our last three hundred dollars."

"Oh, mother!" cried the girl; and their voices fell again.

"They are through, then!" I said to myself, listening. "Their woman's speculation is done for."

The voice of this woman, that so-called Scarlet Cockatoo, rose again and reached me through the darkness.

"We've got to stay. It's here or never. It's the last—absolutely the last chance, Virginia. It's here or it's ruin, for all of us—for you, for Robert Lee, for your mother!"

"Robert Lee!" I said to myself. "What is

this? What sort of gamble is this?" I thought, listening now with all my ears in spite of myself.

"But I won't stay," the strange, unnatural voice of the girl, that White Shoulders, answered her. "I won't be stripped and dragged naked again—by that fiend. Never! I'll die first. It would kill me anyhow."

"That devil—Gluber!" said the mother's voice. "If I could only kill him! That's the one we ought to kill."

"You know what he'll do again—with those letters! He'll never stop—never! Oh, let me go! Let me go! Let me go, mother! Please! Please!" cried the girl's voice, like a young child's in a general breakdown and craziness of fear. "I'll do anything if you'll only let me!"

"You can't go, Virginia," her mother said—apparently taking hold of her, quieting her. "You can't, honey. You can't. You've got to stay, for all of us. You can't leave. You can't desert now. Think of Robert Lee—think of yourself—think of me—a little!"

"Robert Lee!" I said to myself again. "Who's Robert Lee? What's this new turn in this thing?" And in the meanwhile the girl's voice was going on.

"Think! Think! What do I do but think?" she cried back. "It's hopeless, mother. It's

hopeless!" she cried, a newer and higher tone coming into her voice. "We can't go! We can't stay! It's hopeless, that's all! It's hopeless! We can't escape it!"

"No!" the mother's voice came answering her. "I'm going again to Gluber."

And then I lost the conversation once more.

"But you can't," the girl was saying. "What can you say to him?"

The mother's explanation I only partly heard. But there was a mention now and then, I could catch, of Gluber and then of Gordon's name.

"He won't believe that," the girl spoke up. "It isn't true, anyhow."

"How do you know it isn't true?" the mother's voice came back, growing sharp.

"I know. He isn't that kind."

"He'll have to come back—you'll see!" the sharp-voiced mother said, in the tone of arguing with herself. "He'll have to. He'll never give you up. He's just fascinated—by your beauty."

"My beauty! My beauty!" the girl's voice came back, the tone of hysteria coming back into it again. "Don't talk like that—don't! When we are alone! Let me have that much peace. My beauty!"

"And if not Gordon—then there's that other man."

"Who?"

"The black one with the automobile. He's crazy about you."

"Oh, mother—he's not!"

"Why did he come out and do what he did to Gluber, then?"

"I don't know. But it isn't what you say about me. He isn't crazy about me, nor any of them, the way you say. They can't be—especially after this."

"You trust me, Virginia. You trust me. I know men. Some one, somehow, is going to make you marry them here. I know men. When they see and get to care for a girl like you are, honey, they can't forget them. They've got to come back—they can't any of them give up your looks, your face, your gowns—your whole beautiful body."

"Oh, mother!" cried the girl again. I could almost hear her cringing. "Don't! Don't! Don't make it any worse than it has to be."

There was a silence then between them—the woman, I imagine, quieting and trying to soothe the girl.

Then there was a new sound. The girl apparently must have jumped to her feet. "I won't! I won't! I can't any longer!" she cried out.

"What?"

"I won't be dragged round. It's too disgusting. Marriage!" she said. "I hate and loathe the name of marriage! I've been bred for marriage—like a horse for racing. I've heard nothing but marriage, marriage since I was a child—and began to remember. It's disgusting! It's loathsome! I hate the word."

"Virginia!" cried the other woman's voice. But the hysterical voice of the girl went on.

"Always it's been what I could do, what we could all do—when I came to marry. What they should have said was—when I came to be sold. All these dresses! All those clothes! Clothes, clothes, clothes! Lovely hair! Lovely face! Lovely body! I wish I was dead!"

"Virginia! Virginia!" the mother was saying to the frantic girl.

"I won't stay," the girl insisted.

"You can't go," said the mother, her voice hardening. "How would you go? Where? You haven't the money in the first place to go anywhere."

The girl lapsed suddenly into silence; did not answer.

"What can you do?" her mother said again. "No, there's only one thing to be done. We're

Fairborns. We'll stay right here and fight it out —that's all that we can do. I can arrange with Gluber, I know, so he won't go on and write again. I know I can—when I go up to St. Louis and see him. I have a plan worked out to explain things to him—to show him how he will get no more than we by what he's doing."

There was no answer now.

"There'll be no more letters," said the mother confidently, "from now on. And they'll never get any wiser—these fool women here. They'll never go on and learn any more."

"No," said the girl in a low obstinate voice.

"It will all come all right, honey," said the woman, coaxing her.

"No," said the voice of the girl.

"You'll see."

"No," said the girl again, in that dead voice. "It's hopeless. I'll never go through that again. Never."

"Do you forget—everything? Robert Lee—and where he is now—all for the protection of you?"

"I don't forget anything—ever. But it's hopeless. I'm sure now," returned the girl's dead voice again.

"You're a wicked, ungrateful girl."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I am. But I won't stay here—to go through that again. I'm through. We both are. Oh, can't you see, mother? I can't stay here. I can't—any longer—sit and smile and be silent—and know every minute may be the last before I am dragged through that filth again. Just ashamed, ashamed, ashamed!"

Her voice slid up again into high-pitched terror. And I could distinguish now—not so much by words as by tone—the voice of her mother trying her best to soothe a frightened child.

"It'll come right, honey. It'll all come right finally." I made out at last the formula she was repeating over and over again.

"It will never come right. Never, mother. It's hopeless, absolutely hopeless—and you know it."

Their arguing went on—less loud, less violent—the woman trying to quiet the girl, but never, it appeared, convincing her. In absence of their exact words now my mind went off speculating on the probable explanation of the matter—trying to arrange and go over in my own mind the new evidence which had developed in the case during the past few hours, since the coming of that anonymous letter from St. Louis, from that dressmaker with the face of a criminal, or at least a criminal's fence. It was quite apparent by this time that we

were seeing developed under Mrs. Tusset's highly respectable roof a somewhat baffling and possibly serious chain of circumstances.

Women's speculations in matrimony are not unknown—even in our somewhat romantic section of the earth's surface. Even here, in every town, every evening from two-thirty to five-thirty o'clock, Sam Barsam used to claim, the women's matrimonial exchange is in session, watching the market from Texas to South Carolina, sharper than the Cotton Exchange at New Orleans ever dreamed of watching the cotton crop.

These two women were doubtless, as the other womenfolks had caught at once, two speculators, two desperate gamblers in matrimony—playing the market on a shoe string, as the market term goes, I understand; probably, from the evidence so far, with the equipment and enhancement of feminine charms furnished on credit by this dressmaker or dealer in costumes, on instalment plan —this man Gluber, with the singularly repellent countenance and manners, from St. Louis.

This speculation seemed to me to have been fought to the last ditch—lost by the almost tragic course of events on that day of victory. Women —all but the most case-hardened manipulators of matrimony or worse—would scarcely have

remained to fight along beyond that apparently hopeless ending. But here we found these two, or the mother, rather, still forcing the fight—from sheer necessity, it now seemed, and not, as it might have appeared from the surface, because of mere hardness or lack of what might ordinarily have been termed a decent and proper regard for the opinion of others, such as is generally required by sound human society.

The new evidence lay still in an undigested mass, an inexplicable tangle in my mind. Could there have been a murder—a Pitman murder, as this anonymous letter claimed—in which the women were implicated? Assuming the letter to be written by this forbidding dressmaker, it would not necessarily be true—far from it, judging from my casual inspection of that face—except that the apparent probability that he was now using this alleged crime for the purposes of blackmail would tend to the conjecture that there might be at least some truth in the intimation that he was making.

And yet it appeared to me—especially after the enlightenment of the last few minutes from the women's conversation—most repugnant to the general probabilities that these two women were principals or deeply concerned in any murder.

The attitude of the girl, the conversation of the mother—would both seem to deny this. And, moreover, no mention, in set terms, had been made in all their talk, as one would naturally have expected, of any such overshadowing matter as a murder would have been in their lives.

On the other hand, who was this Robert Lee, who was introduced into my knowledge for the first time, who had, it appeared, established this obligation—given this protection for which the girl was now called upon to make her obviously reluctant sacrifice, the last but very few that any woman can be asked to make—the sacrifice of her soul and body for life in an utterly and frankly mercenary marriage.

It was certainly an abstruse and knotty problem—with the evidence so far at hand. I saw I could not solve it with my present knowledge—not until some further development of events, or further information, which the whispering women and their assistant, Cupid Calvert, would no doubt unearth later.

The sobbing of the girl in the next room had died down and the mother had apparently gone into her own chamber and to bed before I fell asleep.

The girl, I thought afterward that I recalled, sobbed again and stopped; and may have arisen

and struck heavily against some object in the room. I am not entirely clear on this.

The next thing I remember with certainty is the sound of light knocking and the low agonized voice of the woman at my door—and then in a moment the faint sweet odour of illuminating gas.

VIII

I WAS out of bed and had snatched my dressing gown from the chair beside me before I was, I expect, entirely awake. The smell of the gas was a certainty now. I could hear the low insistent knocking and the strained whisper of the woman going on with that formula, like a reiterated prayer, which had awakened me: "Judge! Judge Dalrymple! For God's sake, sir, open this door!"

It was not the door into the hallway, I was sufficiently awake now to understand. It must be, then, the door into the adjoining chamber. I ran over to it and started fumbling at the unusual task of opening it. It was fastened, I remembered now, on my side by an old-time iron bolt. I assumed that the same contrivance must have been on the other side. For as I unbolted my bolt the latch apparently was unsprung and the door was forced outward, and by me; and the woman pitched forward with it and the sickish rush of illuminating gas burst in with her.

"I couldn't lift her. She'll die!" she said in a hoarse whisper, and went down, half fainting, upon the floor.

She was only partly overcome, however, for she could still talk.

"Not me," she said. "Help her. Help her. Hurry!"

I lifted her slightly aside and went into the room. "Lie there," I said. "Wait."

If the door was once closed, I reasoned, being still able to speak, the woman would probably recover in the practically pure air of my room. In any case the obvious thing for me to do was to take the girl out of there. I took a deep breath, went in and closed the door.

It was dark in that next room, and the location of the furniture of the room was naturally unfamiliar to me. I was confused—just shaken from sound sleep, not precisely in a normal state of mind. That heavy, nauseating odour of illuminating gas was in my nostrils; I could smell it even if I need not immediately take it into my lungs. I waited several moments, consequently, before I could locate the bed where the girl was probably lying.

There was an electric street light not far outside, which shone in through a window. This not unnaturally was the first thing that caught my

attention. Its rays struck first upon some clothing, some woman's white clothing heaped upon a chair, lit a glint of light upon a glass ornament on a mantlepiece and painted a sharp, irregular oblong of light upon the plain unpapered wall. In the centre of this patch was the sharply etched shadow of a branch or frond of a coarse-leafed tree. A brisk breeze was blowing outside, stirring the branches of the tree; and the coarse and magnified frond of leaf moved back and forth, reaching and retiring, it seemed to me for a second, like a black and clutching claw.

Then, far quicker than the telling of this, naturally, I observed that the patch of light and its sinister-acting shadow was close to the great old-fashioned bed, which lay, in contrast, covered by the dim shadow from its high black footboard. I groped into the shadow and my hand fell upon the bare arm and lightly clad shoulder of the girl.

She lay, I could now see, with her arm trailing down upon the floor and her head at the extreme edge of the bed—a position into which her mother had dragged her undoubtedly when she had reached the limit of her strength. I took the limp and yielding body of the unconscious girl into my arms and started for the door again.

By this time the necessity for breath had

become somewhat oppressive, and with the extreme effort of carrying the girl's body it grew intensely so. I knew, however, that I could hold out somewhat longer, and fortunately, I could now see, there had been some use for my coming. The girl was still alive; I could feel her breathing in my arms—heavily and rather slowly—but still breathing regularly.

Then, as I was noticing this, through awkwardness and unfamiliarity with the dark room, I walked against some low chair or stool—stumbled, staggered with the weight in my arms and before I had caught myself, struck my unguarded head against the wall of the room. With the jar I almost dropped the girl, who was not light and a not inconsiderable burden for me, I was finding. I caught myself, though, before going quite down.

But another unfortunate development of my accident was that unconsciously I had, I assume, expelled my breath and taken into my lungs some of that thick, sweet, nauseating gas which surrounded me. At any rate, with this and the long holding of my breath and the blow of my head against the wall—and no doubt also from the effort of standing erect with my now quite sufficient burden—I lost for a second in the unfamiliar room my sense of direction in the dark

and the exact location of the door which I must find and open up again. I must have turned somewhat in stumbling.

In any case, the chief impression I retained when I straightened up was that I must get out of there with whatever it was I was carrying and that there was one chief object—one point of location—in the room—an angular oblong of light upon the wall, which now appeared to be a lighted window beyond which a black claw on a long black arm shot irregularly back and forth, with the obvious ultimate intention of strangling me and relieving me of my burden—an intention which I was under serious obligation to defeat. I was beginning to believe that I had made an error in judgment in closing the door into my room when I entered the other.

Fortunately, however, I must have remembered the location of the doorway from the chief white spot in my consciousness—that irregular lighted window which had come in the wall. For in a minute or two more I felt the cool slipperiness of the old pottery door knob in my hand and started fumbling it. As I did so, somewhat unsteady and overbalanced with the rapidly growing burden of the girl in my arms and my straining and now almost convulsive effort not to breathe in the gas again, I was struck, I recall, with a dazed surprise

and unexpected satisfaction to see the door open. The mother of the girl, that so-called Scarlet Cockatoo, had, it appeared, recovered sufficiently in the fresh air of my room to crawl back to the doorway on her knees and to open it when she heard me coming.

I went in somewhat weakly, and was much gratified to have shut out behind me the sickening sweetness of the gas, the sense of suffocation and the now almost frantic efforts of the frustated black claw at the diamond-shaped window to clutch us before we finally fled out through that dangerous and suffocating dark.

It was with almost equal satisfaction that I heard the door close behind me and expelled at last the combination of used-up air and illuminating gas which clogged my lungs, and drank in again the acute and too-little-appreciated luxury of oxygen. After that my strength was sufficient to lay the girl upon the bed—and start helping her mother help her.

"Thank God! Thank God!" I heard the woman whispering by me.

The shock of getting the girl back alive was sufficient, it appeared, following the fresh air in my room, to revive her.

The girl—the so-called White Shoulders—was apparently breathing heavily, rather slowly, but

still quite strongly. We could not, naturally, see perfectly—not yet daring to light the gas, even there. There was, however, some light from the street lamp on the street.

I started back again toward the door.

"Where to?" asked the mother, whispering.

"The gas. I must turn that gas jet off," I whispered again.

"Don't. I did that myself!" she said.

"But the windows," I said. "I must open them."

"There are two open," she said, "already—one in my room and one in hers."

"In hers!" I said.

"Yes. It was never closed!" she told me.

That struck me as strange, naturally, then, but naturally too I dismissed it right away—with other things to think of.

"Well then," I said, "I'll go down now and telephone the doctor."

"No! No!" she whispered back. "Wait. She's coming to. See—she's moving a little already."

The girl actually did move—and gave a little moan. She had all the advantages of youth and perfect health, and the gas probably had never been so dense in there as we had thought. By this time all the windows in my room were open, and the outside air, driven in by a strong breeze

was entirely pure and fresh. I started now to light the gas.

"No. No. Please!" the woman said, preventing me.

And again the white girl on the bed moved.

"But I must call a doctor," I said, still whispering.

"No. No," repeated the woman. Not if we can possibly help, sir. Not now—if we can possibly help it."

"But, madam," I said, "all that poison in the girl's system——"

"No, sir," she told me, turning back from where she was bending down above the girl. "I know what to do. I saw one case before. We can do all a doctor could now—more—from being right here now. And besides, she's coming to now fast. She was just trying to open her eyes. She's almost——"

"But, madam," I insisted, "a doctor is positively——"

"Listen!" she whispered back sharply. "There's somebody downstairs."

There was some one—entering the house by the front door.

"We can't have this known, judge. We can't have it get out, sir," she told me in a strident hurried whisper. "We can't do it, sir. I can't

explain to you now. But it would be the last blow for us. We'd better both be dead!"

As a matter of fact I saw the girl appeared to be breathing much better now. We stood and waited in the dark. The steps came up the stairs —very lightly, very carefully. I suspected, naturally, who it would be—Cupid Calvert back again from another affair of the heart.

The steps came to the top of the stairway.

"He'll smell the gas," said the woman beside me in a despairing whisper. "He'll certainly smell the gas."

The steps stole by, started on toward the third story, where Calvert had his room, wavered, stopped, and then in a moment came stealing over toward my side of the hall.

I could almost watch the woman cringe and shrink together in the dark. I saw, too, that something had to be done. I could only hope that it was Calvert and he was in the not unusual and not too clear state of mind in which he was apt to find himself at this hour in the morning. It must have been at that time about two o'clock.

It occurred to me, from the women's standpoint or my own, if we were going to try to hush this matter up the situation was not without elements of embarrassment, I having these two women in my room. In any case, Cupid Calvert was the last

human being we would want concerned in the matter in any phase.

There was only one thing to do. I put my finger on my lips, looked at the woman and walked over and opened the door. I stepped out quickly into the hall and closed the door after me.

"Who's prowling round out here?" I said; and I grabbed him by the collar with what few remnants of vigour I still possessed.

IX

I WAS right in my conjecture—and in my action. It is something of a shock to be grabbed like that in the dark—especially when you yourself are not particularly anxious to create unnecessary disturbance.

"Listen," said a familiar voice in a quick and, it seemed to me, somewhat frightened whisper. "It's only me—Calvert!"

"What were you," I asked him in a whisper myself, "just peering through my keyhole for, the view, or plotting to murder me in my bed?"

"Listen," he said. "Don't you smell it?"

"What?"

"Gas."

I chuckled then—managed to—in the dark. "Oh, that's it?" I said. "Well, I should say I did! But I thought maybe I'd got it out—by this time."

"What—what happened?" he wanted to know.

"Well, sir," I said to him—we were both talking, naturally, in whispers all the time—"it was a

thing that never happened to me in my life before. I was sitting there by that gas jet by the window reading—and fell asleep. And when I woke up it was dark and the room was full of gas."

"Oh, was that it?" he said.

I could tell now from his voice, and breath as well, that, quite fortunately, he was in a state not generally considered best for clear-cut mental operations.

"That heavy breeze blowing in the window!" I said. "Is it strong out here," I asked him—"the smell of it?"

"I should say it was," he told me, in that thick, somewhat damp whisper.

"Well, it's all over with now, anyhow," I said, reaching back and taking hold of my door knob. "And I expect you won't smell it much longer. I've got all the windows open. Where've you been?" I asked him. "Out on another amour?"

"Oh, no, judge. Nothing like that. Nothing like that!" he said; and I could almost hear him grinning in the dark.

"Well," I told him, "crawl along upstairs or we'll wake up the madam, standing gossiping here. But I'll tell you what I'll do," I whispered, "before you go. I'll sign articles of confederation with you. I ain't proud of what I've just done, exactly; and if you'll agree to

overlook it—when tempted to humour in your conversation tomorrow or thereafter—I'll endeavour not to call the attention of Madam Tusset to your continued devotion to late affairs of the human affections, which I see you are still entangled with."

"Oh, nothing like that, judge. You've got me wrong this time," said Cupid. "But at that you know I'd never give you away—in any of your little sins or shortcomings. And I know you wouldn't me, either."

"That expresses my feelings exactly," I whispered back.

And I knew when he turned and went along that there would probably be nothing said from that quarter. His tenure of station had grown a little precarious in recent weeks from his various protracted and late night excursions, which were not to the taste of Madam Tusset, who was credited, in fact, with the intention of turning him out from that highly respectable house on the next and slightest evidence of any lapses from high moral or social standards.

So he stole upstairs and I turned back into the room.

"Now, then, about the doctor," I said. "It seems to me——"

"She's all right now," said the mother. "She's coming out fine, sir."

"But——" I started.

"Judge," she broke in on me, "please, sir, don't insist on that. We can't do it. On top of what's happened already, sir. It would destroy us!"

I lighted the gas then finally and I turned with her and looked at the girl on the bed. She did seem almost recovered. Her face was somewhat flushed, from the effects of the gas, I expect. But she was breathing naturally and regularly. As she lay there I thought she was pretty near the most beautiful human creature I ever saw.

"You see, judge," said the mother, "she's coming out all right. She's almost out already."

And as she said this the girl moved, opened her great eyes, looked at us—first her mother and then me, steadily and with wonder—and spoke for the first time.

"I know, mother. I know," she said. "I had —no right—to die!" she said faintly. "I won't ——"

And her eyes closed heavily, as if to shut the unwelcome world out once again.

Her mother was on her knees by the bedside now.

"You wicked, wicked girl!" she cried in that continued whisper which we both still used, and burst into a great silent paroxysm of weeping —of relief, no doubt, from her anxiety and terror.

I stood aside and let her weep it out, purge her soul of its emotion; and thought meanwhile of the girl's extraordinary greeting to returning life.

"I had—no right—to die!" I said over to myself, and looked at that exquisite creature in her sheer and exquisite white garments in my bed, who wanted, for reasons of her own, apparently, to give up life—destroy herself.

"This certainly is a strange affair," I told myself.

The beauty of the girl was all the more marked by its contrast with the haggard, disheveled person of the mother. The woman's not too abundant hair was tangled upon her head; the crow's-feet at her eyes and the stringy thinness of her neck showed, undisguised; and the rouge of her cheeks, bleared by her weeping, stared out in strange red relief against her dry and whitened skin in the trying greenish light which comes from gas in a mantle burner.

"Madam," I said finally, when I saw she had about completed her weeping, "you may be right. You know your own affairs—and your necessities.

She is your own child. Suppose we do this—suppose we wait and see, a little longer, about the doctor."

"You understand, don't you?" she asked, catching me by the sleeve. "But no, you can't, either! I'm not inhuman. I'm not an inhuman mother, sir, but I'm a desperate one. I'm a desperate woman in a desperate situation, and the least thing more now would destroy us."

"It is not necessary, madam," I said, "to explain. I'll take your word for it."

The girl had opened her eyes now and lay staring at us. "She's done that before," her mother explained to me. "When you were outside."

"I see. All right," I said. "And as far as I go in this matter, you must not worry—about my discretion," I told her. I thought I would reassure her. "In my business men are—or should be—graveyards full of just such matters."

She murmured something about a mother's blessing, a mother's gratitude, and tried to take my hand.

"Tomorrow," she said—"or when I can—I want to see you—to explain—everything."

The girl now lay there, apparently rapidly recovering, looking at us steadily with her wide-opened eyes and then closing them calmly.

"Any time, madam," I told her mother, "that I can be of any assistance to you! But in the meanwhile," I said, "I expect we'd better count on letting matters stand as they are now—on your keeping my room for the rest of the night. And I'll venture into your rooms now and find out how much they are cleared out from gas. They should be pretty well by this time—especially with this breeze that's blowing in here now. And if so, I can go in there and stay—after—maybe you may want to go into your own room yourself."

For she not only was a somewhat ghastly revelation with her hair and smeared face but she was clothed only in her night garments and some sort of a ribboned dressing gown, and with th recovery of the girl we were both becoming conscious of the fact.

I went in there and found both their chambers practically free from the gas fumes. And the woman—this Mrs. Fairborn, so-called—went in then and made a hasty toilet in her room.

I sat there while she was gone, slightly away from the bedside, watching that white young creature in my bed. Her eyes opened occasionally and gazed at me with the calm indifference of folks who, at the edge of unconsciousnes or death, seem interested in larger and more serene affairs.

I sat and watched that wonderful young girl,

with all her life, all her extraordinary beauty, speculating, turning over in my mind the possible reasons for her act and for those words—that first singular statement on her return to life: "I had—no right—to die!"

She said nothing more, just lay there. Her mother came in again—dressed—more normal. After a few minutes more I went into her room and left her with the girl.

About dawn we helped her back into her own bed.

"Judge," said the mother in parting, "never, sir, can I forget what you have done for us tonight. You have put us under an obligation, sir, which is more than we can ever repay. Aside from saving my daughter's life, you have saved us—even more! More than you can ever know—not being a mother or a woman, sir. We were more than fortunate in having come to our rescue not only a hero, sir, but a gentleman and a man of discretion."

"About my qualities as a hero, ma'am, I have my doubts," I said, "but I am certain sure that you can count on my discretion. And if there is any other way in which I can serve you in your affairs," I told her, "I hope you will command me."

"Bless you for that too," said the woman—

the natural normal effusiveness of the Scarlet Cockatoo returning, with a return of hope and vigour. "A mother's blessing will follow you forever, sir, and I shall take advantage of what you now say and see you in your office not later, I hope, than tomorrow—or today, I should say sir." For the light of another morning was now already well come.

Her restless, nervous manner had returned to her with a return to taking up again the fixed and pressing burdens of life. Her face showed drawn and haggard in the light of a new dawn —the face, it occurred to me, of a small animal, too weak for the forces round it, which must make up, day and night, by nervous alertness and vigilance and excitement what it lacks in strength—until in some mistake, maybe, it darts finally of its own motion to its own destruction —into danger, out of life.

The girl was immediately lost in a deep and peaceful sleep in the bed where we had laid her. I was soon in my own room, in a rest as entire and profound.

Of all of us three, in five minutes from the time I had left them, only the mother, I believe, was awake—watching with strained eyes and painted face the sleeping girl upon the great old-time black-walnut bed.

X

WHEN I came downstairs finally, late for breakfast, the woman, the Scarlet Cockatoo, so-called, was there before me, in full war paint, as Calvert would have said; apparently no worse—certainly no different to the naked eye—than usual. She was evidently just in receipt of her morning mail.

"I don't see your daughter down this morning, ma'am," I said, bowing to her. "I trust she is not ill."

"Just a headache, judge, thank you, sir," she said, looking at me, straight in the eyes, "which came on rather sudden in the night. But she's a whole lot better now, and by noontime, sir, we hope she will be up and downstairs for luncheon."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said.

And then the person, whoever it was, who was standing near us, moved off.

"Judge," said the Fairborn woman in a lower voice, "when are you going to be in your office today—during this morning, sir?"

"Madam," I answered, "any time. Just as

soon as I get through here with my breakfast."

"I'm afraid, sir," she said, in a lower voice still, "I've got to pester you again with my affairs. I hate to—but this is imperative, sir. I've had another thing this morning come to bother me."

"Any time, ma'am," I told her. "It's a pleasure."

"Would right away—would nine-thirty be too early?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "I'll be delighted to see you at that hour."

I noticed then the extra sharpness of her voice and that letter she held in her hand.

By nine-thirty we were closed up in conference in my office.

"Your daughter, ma'am," I asked her, "is all right, then?"

"Yes, sir, judge," she said, "with a thousand thousand thanks to you, sir."

"I'm glad to hear that, ma'am," I told her.

"But now," she said, "that's scarcely over when this comes up—a part, sir, of what happened last night—the reason!"

"Go ahead, ma'am," I told her, sitting back—wondering if I was about to be let in and informed on her mystery.

"It's about this letter," she told me, "which

just arrived this morning—which I must have your advice upon, sir, right off—this morning."

"What is it?"

"Doubtless," she answered me, "sir, you've heard about that man—that dressmaker. You've heard them whispering various stories, I expect, about that man from St. Louis, who disturbed my daughter so on the day of that festival."

"I knew it was believed, in some way," I told her, "that man was in some way concerned in it. Who was this man—if that's a fair question, ma'am?"

"Gluber, his name is," she told me. "He's a dressmaker—or rather, sir, a seller of dresses in St. Louis."

"Yes," I said, and waited.

"That we," she went on—"to put it frank and open—owe a heap of money to."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"For my daughter's wardrobe."

I sat and waited.

"I want to tell you, judge, all I have time to just now, sir. I want to make you my full confidant and get your invaluable advice on what I am confronted with, sir."

"My advice is your's, ma'am," I said, studying her, "for the asking. I won't guarantee anything about its value to you."

She went on then and opened up one corner of her woman's speculation to me.

"You've heard more or less, doubtless, sir, the various comments on me and my daughter—the things they talk concerning us coming in here, sir, trying to snatch away some man or other, some husband from the other marriageable girls here. Well, sir," she said, "I admit it, sir, so far as I myself am concerned. I came here looking for a husband for my girl. I make no shame nor apology for it, sir. I'm doing just what every sensible mother wants to do, if she speaks the truth —marry off her daughter to advantage.

"I want to tell you, judge," she went on, "I was reared and trained up like you was, I expect, in the good old-fashioned Southern way. I've seen some of the new ways—of these girls who start on some new idea, to earn a living for themselves. That may be all right for a while, sir, a certain period. But finally, in the end, it all comes down, with any real woman, to whether she's married to advantage. That's a woman's real business, getting married. And you know it and I do—and the more we recognize it the more sensible it's apt to come out. And the better for her."

"Not always the most money, maybe," I said, trying her.

"Do you think so, judge?" she said. "I

don't. Money's a mighty useful thing to have."

"Nobody can successfully refute that, I expect, madam," I said.

"I know something, sir," she said, "about that from hard experience. I married—nothing—for love!"

"You mean to convey it wasn't a success, ma'am?"

"No, sir, it was not," she told me. "I starved to death for twenty years. I lost my looks and the best part of my life planning, laughing, keeping up and protecting appearances—for an easy-going, happy-go-lucky husband, who stayed with me till he didn't like my looks, the looks he'd lost me, working to keep him up a decent appearance before the world by smiling and dragging along his affairs and borrowing and begging for his broken-down old plantation—till he went off and left me. And then afterward he died," she added. "Oh, you can't tell me, judge," she went on, her voice rising up and sharpening, "that there's any fairness between men and women, because there's not. After a woman's looks are gone she's gone with them—so far as you men are concerned. I know that. You think I'm funny, I expect, judge," she went on explaining herself now while I watched her—"my actions, my laughing and carrying on. Everybody does; I know that.

But they wouldn't, maybe, if they'd had to do it themselves twenty-five years, as I have, for a living. It gets engraved on you after awhile—into your nerves; and when you do it you get hysterical and get away from yourself. Oh, I know!

"But anyhow," she went on after awhile, "whatever you may think about me, sir, when my little girl came I made up my mind she'd never do what I did. She'd never go through life smiling and scraping and patching up appearances like I did for a man, who would give nothing for her in the end—not even his love and affection. Not if I could prevent it, anyway!

"But this don't get us anywhere," she said then, starting up and bringing out this letter. "Especially as I want to get away—as my train gets out now inside of two hours.

"You're going away!" I said, surprised.

"Yes, sir," she answered; "to St. Louis."

"And take the girl?" I asked her.

"Oh, no, sir," she said. "Just temporarily—on business. I'll be back tomorrow or the next day. Now look at this, sir," she said, and spread the typewritten letter before me, that abusive screed from that dressmaker.

I took it and read it through—to the last paragraph.

It ran about like this:

So you should play a funny business on me, huh? With your bunk stories on a marriage. Nix for that. I'm no simp, to stand for that again. So now we are going back and begin over again. You'll dig up that $750 that's still coming from somewhere, or the letters start again. Maybe by this time you should hear from one already —the first one only. Come now, be sudden, or you'll hear right off again from

Yours very sincerely,
A. Gluber.

"Who's that?" I asked, knowing right well who it must be.

"The one that was here—that's caused everything—that terrible thing last night!"

"Who? That dressmaker?"

"That fiend, Gluber, who's always hunting us."

"For what?"

"For that money we still owe him on account —that he's always chasing us around for."

"Tell me about it," I said to her.

And she went on then with the details and specifications of her disastrous adventure.

"I was left, sir," she said, "with this one boy and one girl—and this old mortgaged plantation

I've been telling you about. We were the best blood in the South—my family, the Fairborns, sir."

"Your family!" I said after her. "I thought your married name was Fairborn."

"I took my family name back," she said, "awhile after the separation. But then, after that, sir," she went on, "everything went wrong. The plantation—which was nothing in the first place—ran down and down. And then finally my boy, my Robert Lee, got in this awful trouble. He was nothing but a boy, sir. He shot a man. Justifiably, everybody said, sir. He just had to! But they sent him to the penitentiary, sir, nevertheless."

She stopped and wiped her lips in her excitement. I could see the red spot from her painted lips come off on her handkerchief. I asked her nothing, let her go on, in her own time.

"So you see," she said—evidently after a little consideration of what she should say next—"all I had left, all there was of the Fairborn blood—that had made Dell County what it was—that the county seat was named for, sir—was just my girl. I was determined she should be something—have the chance I never did. I was determined she should marry right and well—to advantage—to a man who was her equal in blood and her superior

in fortune, sir. And it became clear to me that that was the one way to keep the Fairborns and the Fairborn name from sinking out of sight in the ground, like so many of our best Southern names have done, sir, forever. It was not only for the girl, sir—it was for the whole family—after those terrible disasters we had gone through."

"I understand you, ma'am," I said when she stopped and panted—from excitement, apparently, and weariness, partly, no doubt, I thought, watching her, from that night before.

"You've seen the girl, sir," she said to me. "She's a girl that anybody'd be proud to marry—any man in the whole world, sir. Ain't that true, Judge Dalrymple, sir?"

"It certainly is," I told her.

"So I determined, some way, I would take her out and away from home."

"Away from home?" I said after her.

"She couldn't stay there, could she, after that awful affair of Robert Lee's—that shooting? Could she, sir?" she said to me.

I felt at that time, while she was talking, that she knew as well as I that there was something more there which I should have been informed about. Right there, doubtless, I could understand, very likely might be the murder—that case

referred to in the anonymous letter—the Pitman murder case. But I could feel her wince away from it, I thought—instinctively defending a sore spot—and I sat still as she went along, talking fast, explaining her next move.

"So I made up my mind, sir, we'd go out to some city—where I could get letters to or get acquainted in some way—and Virginia should have her chance—like every girl should have."

I nodded.

"You see," she said, speaking faster as she went along, "she had—we had—just one thing left out of everything. Her beauty. The Fairborns were always noted, sir, for their lovely women. But no one I ever saw or read about was just like her."

"She is a wonderful fine girl," I said.

"Yes, sir," she went on. "That was about all that was left to all the Fairborns—this one girl. So I said, sir, I'd take her to some other city—to some place where she would meet nice men—the kind that she should have and that should have her. You know what marrying men there are in a place like Dell County. There ain't any. So I said she should go somewhere, if it took our last cent. And then I made that terrible mistake about——"

"About what?" I said, prompting her finally.

"This terrible dressmaker—this fiend of a Gluber."

"How so?" I asked her.

"I heard there were such things—of men in St. Louis and other cities who made it their business, sir, to furnish clothes—wardrobes of clothes—to various women—such as women of the stage, sir—and let them pay them after awhile, part at a time—by giving some sort of notes or papers."

"Some instalment plan, I presume."

"Yes, sir. Exactly, sir," she went on. "You'll think I was foolish, but I was desperate. I was determined, sir, that my baby, my Virginia, should have her chance; and she couldn't ever hope to have it unless I did something like that to get her ready."

"Ready!" I said after her.

"To dress her up. All she had in the world was just those few old rags of my old wardrobe —a few old country duds that I could afford to buy her. Oh, you know that, judge!" she said.

"Know what?"

"You know how much you men have got to have done for you by women dressing themselves up. How much chance a girl would have with no dresses or, worse yet, in country clothes. How soon she'd get laughed out of town—by the other

women and the men—and you yourself. It's unfortunate, sir," she went along, "but you men are pretty mighty exacting of us women—in looks and manners and behaviour and every way. More so, I expect, than you have any idea of, sir. I expect it's only natural, but it's true just the same—especially about looks. A girl's got to have dresses nowadays to get anywhere. Oh, I didn't go into this without thinking, judge. I didn't act before I went down deep into the whole thing—and saw that if I was going to do anything I'd have to do it right—and big. I was handicapped enough, as it was. I saw I'd have to go through the whole thing—right—in order to go with good people, the kind of people I'd want to, that the Fairborns naturally would care to associate their daughter with, sir; that I'd have to act and live and dress her as near as possible as they would."

"But let me ask you this," I asked her, when she stopped a minute. "How'd you come to get in with that Gluber—that kind of cattle—such as that dressmaker looks to be?"

"It was all my own doing, judge," she told me. "I saw somewhere about there being such people—and I had to do something. And so I went up to St. Louis, sir, and I went round and asked questions till finally I found this man."

"All right," I said. "So you got tied up with this fellow—this dressmaker in St. Louis—for the purpose of doing this."

"Yes, sir."

"You took that gamble—on your daughter's looks?"

"Yes, sir. That's what it was, I expect. A gamble—for her sake and for ours."

"And this man—this dealer in costumes—financed you, you might say."

"Yes, sir," she said, "that was it."

"And then what?"

"And then, sir, you see, it was this way. I paid him, Gluber, down what I could, then."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I couldn't pay him all. I had to have money to live on—to travel with, you understand."

"Yes, ma'am, I understand."

"Of course I had pretty mighty little, sir, after what I'd just been through; after my boy's trial, and all that. And I had to keep quite a considerable amount for our expenses, sir. So I let the plantation go—for what I could realize on it, sir, over and above the mortgages. It wasn't giving us a living."

I whistled to myself, thinking it over—that woman's speculation and the logic back of it.

"And you set out with your girl," I said,

prompting her along, now she had stopped again.

"Yes, sir; to Louisville, sir."

"And then what?"

"That's where our troubles began, judge. It was this way. We'd just got established in Louisville, you might say, meeting some fine lovely cultivated people—people with large means, sir—through letters and various ways I had, when this dressmaker, this fiend of a Gluber, started in against us."

"For his money?"

"Yes, sir. For the note I had given him. He claimed I hadn't been fair—that I'd misrepresented things to him about what I had for property, sir. Maybe I did, sir, some. I may have let him think some ideas he had already—about our having more property than we actually had. I won't say I didn't, sir. I had to have that money—I just had to."

"I understand," I said. "And then he took after you in Louisville."

"Yes, sir. We were just getting started there. Virginia was just getting acquainted with the nicest young people when he came on asking for this money—that I couldn't pay him."

"What did you do then, ma'am?"

"What could I do, judge? I couldn't pay out

what money I had to pay for our expenses. I couldn't do that and be left, sir——"

"With both the dresses and the girl!"

"Yes, sir. Precisely. And nothing else."

"So what did you do?"

"I tried to hold him off, sir."

"And then what?"

"Then he started on those letters—those anonymous letters, to other folks, to make me pay. He thought, naturally, and still does, too, that we could pay some way if we wanted to; or we could get some relation to somewhere—for the sake of family pride, sir. The Fairborns have always held their heads high, sir, in our part of the country. And it seems that's what he does all the time—dealing with women the way he does. That's the way he works with them."

"How do you mean?"

"Scaring them, always scaring them—different ways. Married women who come to him secretly—scaring them that he'll tell their husbands; and stage women, other women—scaring them all in different ways, according to how he can best terrify them. A regular bloodhound, sir—always hounding them down, scaring them to make them pay him."

"A kind of blackmail enterprise."

"I expect you'd call it so."

"And what did he do with you—with those letters? How could he find out about whom to write them to in the first place?"

"It seems, judge, he's been everywhere. It seems he knows all the collection agencies—all the instalment folks that get part payments from people. There's an army of them, all over. It's a great big business, judge, sir, in all the cities, they tell me."

"I understand so," I said, thinking.

"So he found out about us easy enough—where we were going in Louisville and the people we knew—from this kind of folks—for a few dollars or for friendship's sake. For they're all kind of in together. And he'd gone down or sent down and found about us at home, now, and all our weak spots there."

"So he wrote these letters to folks to scare you into paying. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. That's it, judge. That's exactly it, sir. Following us everywhere the way he'd done from the beginning—like a bloodhound. Starting easy first, in these letters, and then telling how he'd go stronger if I didn't pay up."

"What'd he write about?" I asked her, remembering again, naturally, that one anonymous letter from him that I had seen—the hint of murder.

"There were plenty of things to say, weren't there, judge?" she asked me back, evading me again, I thought, a little; coming again to that territory she didn't care to enter. "If he said nothing more than that our clothes weren't paid for. And then too, judge, naturally, there was that trial of my boy—and all that."

"Naturally," I answered.

I could see from the way she touched it—and drew away—that she was willing to avoid that subject—that shooting or murder, or whatever it might be, as far as possible. And I had no intention of forcing its discussion on her, especially if it wasn't necessary.

"And then what'd you do?" I asked her.

"What could I do, sir? I did something I oughtn't to have done, I expect. I came away from there in secret. I just ran away, thinking to avoid him."

"With the dresses that you owed him for?"

"Yes. I was useless if I didn't have them, sir, and I couldn't pay out all the money I had to settle for them and keep on. And I intended always, sir, so help me God, to pay the man his bill some day. And besides, sir, if he never got paid again—anything—he'd have more today than the dresses were worth—just from what I've paid him already."

"And then you stole away from him?"

"Yes, sir. I managed to. There was quite a little time there before he found out where we'd gone to. But he found me—he smelt me out finally—like the bloodhound he is! Like he always does!"

"And now he's after you with his anonymous letters, starting over again to get payment on that note—whatever it is he holds against you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you got it here?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir," she said. "That's what I came here to talk with you about, mostly."

"Let me look at it," I told her.

And she took it out and went over it with me.

"Do you mean to say you signed that note with that interest and those terms?"

"Yes, sir. That's just what I did. I had to, I thought."

"Well, madam," I said, after examining it through, "you didn't have to. And what's more, he can't hold you on it. And what's still more, madam," I said, "you can tell him right now that this document is illegal and if he don't stop threatening you or trying further to collect anything like that you'll land him in jail, and you can tell him, ma'am, I said so."

The woman's face changed entirely while I was giving her this information.

"Can I tell him that, judge," she asked me, "as coming from you?"

"You certainly can, ma'am," I said. "And put it just as strong as you like. You've been pestered and blackmailed and run round by a scoundrel, ma'am, on a perfectly worthless document, and if you were my womenfolks it would be a mighty short period before I'd land him in jail—between the two things, that note and the blackmail."

The woman—this Scarlet Cockatoo, so-called—was up on her feet now.

"Judge, sir," she said in her highest, brightest voice, "you've made me terribly happy, sir. You've told me just the one thing in the world I was hoping and praying to hear. You've saved me—my life again, sir. I never can thank you enough for this, and for everything else. But now," she said, "I've got to go. I'm in a desperate hurry—if I'm going to catch that train!"

"What train?"

"The train up to St. Louis," she told me.

"But your girl—your Virginia—is she all right to leave now?" I asked her.

"She is, yes," she said. "Perfectly. And if

she wasn't I'd have to fix it somehow so I could go. I'd have to go somehow," she said, that sharp, strident tone coming to her voice; that sharp, hard, alert look back, permanent, in her eyes again—the look of a desperate and overextended gambler.

She thanked me again in her hard nervous voice and hurried out, starting to get ready for her St. Louis train.

XI

THE next day, the next morning after that, before she arrived back, I had another visitor at my office whom I had not been anticipating. The girl, this so-called White Shoulders, had not appeared, it seemed, at luncheon that noon after I had talked with her mother; but that evening she had been down to dinner, after an all-day session with a furious headache, having had her instructions doubtless to appear in public as early as humanly possible. The next morning after that she was able, it appeared, to get down to my office.

"You oughtn't to have done this, Virginia," I said to her.

"Judge," she answered, "I want to talk to you. To thank you first——"

"Don't," I said, "please, ma'am. I'll take that for granted."

"All right, sir. But I've got to say something, haven't I—to show——"

"If you won't, ma'am," I said. "Please."

"Well, all right," she told me. "But there is another thing, for my own selfish interest, that

I want to talk to you about, while she's gone—while I can. I may never have the chance again."

"What's that?" I asked her.

"I want to talk to you about myself, judge," she said, the blood coming up into her pale face; "if you'll let me, sir. I don't want, I can't bear—after what you've done—to have you think—as you must—think I'm either all a bad woman—or a fool."

"My dear girl—my dear Virginia," I tried to say.

"I wanted—if you'd let me—to show you just what a fix I'm in. So you'll understand. So you won't think too hard of me, sir, when it all comes out."

"I won't think hard of you, child," I told her. "And your mother's told me all about it!"

"Has she?" she said. "How much? Tell me, please, if you will, judge."

I told her as far as I could, she listening, quiet and silent and white again, with her hands still in her lap—about the dresses, the blackmailer, the whole woman's speculation, as her mother outlined it; and finally I touched in passing the point I didn't understand—the shooting scrape—whatever it was, the boy, Robert Lee, had been in.

"Did she tell you all about that?" the girl asked me.

"No," I answered her. "I didn't press her to naturally."

"Did she tell you what it was about—the shooting?"

"No."

The girl smiled that slow, supposedly indifferent smile of hers. "No, she wouldn't do that—ever," she told me.

"What was it about?"

"It was about me."

"About you?"

"Yes," she said, "and that's why I wanted to talk to you, judge; to tell you just how things really were, so you'll know when the story—when all the other versions—do come out. And then, too, I'm going to have the unusual luxury of talking about myself. I appreciate it, sir. It's a real rare treat to me," she said, smiling that cold slow smile again.

She was dressed fit to kill, in the gayest of spring garments; she picked up, as she talked, the gay-coloured, expensive parasol she had set down beside my desk when she had come in.

"You thought, I expect, sir," she said, "with all the rest, when you first saw us, that we were just two common adventuresses."

"No, ma'am," I began. "I certainly——"

"A sharp adventuress with a big loud-dressed girl. Just two imposters," she broke in; and went on again, before I had time for denying it.

"Well, you were right, if you did. Even our name, or my name anyhow, is false."

"Your name!" I said after her.

"My name—my father's name—is Pitman."

"Pitman!" I said, remembering, naturally, the anonymous letter and the alleged Pitman murder case. "So your brother——"

"You are thinking of the shooting, aren't you?" she asked, looking up.

"Maybe I was," I said—"among other things."

"Yes. He was called that—and is still," she said. "We were always—till we had to change—till we came to this last place here. And that's what they call the trial always—back home in Dell County. The Pitman trial—maybe because our folks were so well known always. And that's what they call me—always there still, I expect—that Pitman girl!"

She stopped, motionless—her still, hopeless-looking hands in her white gloves folded over her gay parasol, which lay crosswise in her lap. I let her alone—to talk when she was ready.

"It isn't so easy, judge, after all," she said then, "to tell it. Maybe because I'm not very

much used to talking about myself."

"Take your time, Virginia. Take your time," I told her.

"I'll tell it to you from the beginning—if you please, sir," she told me.

"Any way," I said.

Then she waited awhile.

"You've been there, judge," she said finally, "in that part of the state. You know how they run to raising race horses out there—blooded stock."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "That's quite a country for horses, up that way."

"I used to love them when I was a little girl," she said, flushing up again. "And we used to have our own. I used to love to get on them when I had the chance and ride and ride and ride!

"But what I was going to say was that I was like them, I've thought sometimes, in a way. I was reared, in a way, like they were—useless, only for a special fancy purpose."

"For what do you mean?" I asked her.

"For marriage. I was for sale—at high prices. Fancy blooded stock, pedigreed."

She laughed—the harsh, resentful laugh of a woman of fifty.

"Virginia, I don't like to hear you—or any other young girl—talk thataway," I told her.

"Why?" she said, resting her great big eyes on me again. "It's true, isn't it—of all girls, of all women, in a way—with our kind of folks? They've got to find somebody who's willing to support them—to pay out money for having them—all their lives. Only they don't see it—or they don't say it, anyway. They just act it. Their mothers especially. It's like all those big things—death and children and all like that—we don't talk about them, do we? We just go on and take them for granted. And that's the way I've thought about marriage. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm not very old or very wise yet. I haven't thought very deep, I expect."

"You're too old and wise," I thought to myself, looking at her. "You've thought too much—for your age." If she had seemed still and heavy before, she seemed anything but that now. I sat still again waiting for her to go on—when she wanted to.

"Did women always, when you were young, talk of nothing else but dresses and pretty looks and getting engaged and married—and having parties to show them at, like fairs? Is that all they talked about always?" she asked me then.

"I expect they did some, ma'am. A good lot of women are apt to."

"I never remember a time when I didn't hear

it all the time—dresses, engagements, marriage. I never remember when I didn't hear my mother talking about a brilliant marriage."

"I've heard that kind of talk myself in my day," I told her.

"That was what I drank in before my alphabet; with my toys, with all the dresses they loaded on me. I've often wondered if it was the same with other little girls. A brilliant marriage. I had no idea what it was, but I was going to have one. I was trained for it—for nothing else in the world —when I was in the nursery. Yes, really—I mean it, judge, sir! With my first ribbons—my first fine little white shoes! That was all I was trained for—all I was good for. And then—when I was almost ready to be what I was reared for—I was spoiled!"

"Spoiled!" I said after her.

"Absolutely. I was spoiled. A waste, for the only thing on God's earth I was made for. With all those dresses, with all she'd spent on me, I was spoiled! I'm absolutely worthless. I'm a waste."

"You," I said, "with your looks, with everything in this world ahead of you, complaining like that. You ought to be ashamed, ma'am. If it was me now at my age, there might be some logic to it."

She looked at me with those great still eyes of hers.

"I'm not complaining, judge. I'm just stating facts. I'm useless—I'm spoiled for the only thing I'm fitted for."

"Useless!"

"I'm raised to be married!"

"Say you are," I told her, "if you want to."

"Nobody could marry me. Nobody could," she said in a low voice—"if they only knew." And she stopped still.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked her finally.

She sat there for a little bit before she started answering. Then I could see her hands tighten on her big parasol again and she started talking.

"This man"—talking slow and looking off—"the first one she started to marry me to, was the richest man in our county. More than twice as old as I was then. I was only seventeen that spring," she said, looking at me now with a kind of appealing look under her big wide hat brim. And then she stopped again.

"How old are you now?" I asked her.

"I'm nineteen," she said, and went on telling me. "He had the most wonderful horses. I love horses. I always did—anything that could go—move fast and be free. You think—you would

now—that I'm stupid—that I just love to sit around in fine clothes and look stupid and pose. I don't. I hate it! I hate it! I'm naturally big and strong and active, sir. What I love more than anything in this world, sir, is motion, freedom, horses—something going somewhere! I've had so much of the other thing, I expect, all my life—sitting round, looking nice and pretty!

"Judge," she went on, "he gave me a wonderful time—that Colonel Singleton—with his horses. So far as I knew that was all—everything! If there was anything—anything else—any—any advances on his part—I expect probably I wouldn't have known. I was too much—of just a little girl. All I thought was he gave me a wonderful time with his saddle horses—and that sometime, maybe, so mother said, he'd probably marry me. There'd be a brilliant marriage. I never thought of it or anything else, except in a general sort of far-off way. Or how she was spending all the money she could rake up to dress me with—to make me attractive, so he'd want to have me."

She broke off then for a minute or two.

"I want to ask you something, judge, sir," she said to me, "that I never yet understood. I always wanted to ask somebody—like you—I could trust. Is there nothing that's attractive to a man, really and truly—is a woman nothing to a

man but dresses and looks—and—body? Is that all she can possibly be, sir? Tell me honestly. I want to know."

"No. I hope not," I said. "Why?"

"Oh—I don't know. I hate you—all—sometimes!" she said. She stopped while I waited—and then she went on finally with her story.

"This man, it seems, this Colonel Singleton—I didn't know it—how could I? This man was terrible in every way. Only he was rich—for our country! Somebody who would have heaps of money—if you married him. But it seems everybody was wondering—sneering, laughing—about my mother's ever allowing me to go round with him—to say nothing of——! She was desperate, I—the way we are now—for something—for a brilliant marriage, I believe. She thought I was so wonderful. You know what I mean—she thought so; not I! She thought that when he saw me, dressed the way she dressed me, he'd have to have me—to marry me!"

Her paleness was gone now; her face was flushed. Her great eyes stared into mine.

"Judge," she said, "please. Don't misunderstand me—please. There was nothing, absolutely nothing. He was perfectly nice to me—every way—whatever else he had been to any other woman. Only people laughed and whispered and

then finally sneered out loud at her trusting me with that man that way. And finally—they said—the man, when he had been drinking, it seemed, laughed at us—at mother—what a fool she was, the way she was throwing me at him. What he could do, or ought, or might do—with me! Some slandering talk, anyway. And then Robert Lee——" she said, and stopped, clutching tighter at her parasol and swallowing.

"Robert Lee—my brother, judge—heard of it. He was nothing but a child, judge—a boy, truly! He was just a year older than I was. But you know how it is with Southerners—with Fairborns, and folks like that! All that old-time family pride! He couldn't stand it, sir, when he heard it. So one day, judge, sir, he went and got a pistol, and he went over to this Colonel Singleton's, and he asked him what he'd meant by all this talk. And he just laughed and told him to mind his business and go back to the nursery and roll his hoops. And they got talking and arguing, judge, and Robert Lee just pulled out that revolver and shot him!"

"Shot him!" I said, looking back into her staring eyes.

"Dead. Yes, sir. Dead!" she said, and stopped again.

"Do you see how it was, judge, now?" she asked

me. "How I was spoiled—all of us—but I especially. Especially me!"

"Go ahead, ma'am," I said, waiting, staring—"when you feel you want to."

"They tried him, of course; they tried Robert Lee for murder. He was a right prominent man, judge, this Colonel Singleton. Very rich for our country—and with heaps and heaps of powerful friends and relations. They wanted revenge, sir. They wanted to hurt us—every possible way. They wanted to damage us all they could. They had all the money to hire the best lawyers—the most terrible that money could buy! While ours, naturally, was only what we could afford to pay for."

"I know," I said, trying to steady her a little.

"So they tried him—Robert Lee—for murder; and at the same time—I don't understand law, judge; I never did quite understand yet—but they tried me, it seemed like, all the time—more even than they tried Robert Lee. We claimed—our lawyer—you see, judge, that he had slandered me—this man; and so brother was justified—in a way, you know—and being so young, especially!"

"I know."

"But the other people—that head lawyer, that big expensive man——" she said—and suddenly

put her gloved hands to her ears. "I can hear him now—see him—with that terrible hard, harsh, hateful voice—his thin face and eyes that hated you—and red hair and freckles—and that great high, snarling, hateful voice. I can hear him any time ever since, talking, questioning, asking me those dreadful questions—about things I never even heard of, judge! You believe me, judge!" she cried out. "I never heard of such things—in my life!"

I tried to speak to her, but my mouth, I expect, was too dry—from sitting staring, listening to the girl's high, hysterical voice.

"For he didn't try—that lawyer—to prove that this man—this Colonel Singleton—hadn't said what it was that made brother shoot him—that slander! He even made it worse than he ever said! He just tried—to claim—it wasn't slander—about me! That what he said about me—couldn't be slander, sir!"

I sat and stared at her. It couldn't be the same girl I had been seeing all those weeks—that silent, inert, what we thought posing, White Shoulders. She couldn't be this woman with dilated eyes and set face that was looking at me, half beside herself with that memory.

"It wasn't true, judge. It wasn't. You believe that, don't you? Or I couldn't be saying this

to you. I couldn't! Why, judge—I didn't—even know of such things. They only did it—for revenge—for hate of us. The jury said so, judge. They sentenced Robert Lee—for a short term—they had to; but they acquitted me. They went out of their way to. For it was me—it was me that was being tried then—even more than he was. Was being hinted at and jeered and flouted—and held up—and asked these hideous questions—by that hideous, thin-faced, snarling lawyer, with those little greenish eyes, like a nasty cat—that hateful voice—asking me—talking about me—using names! Oh, judge, how can they! How could they let people say such things in court—to other folks—about other people—those lawyers—when courts are supposed to be for justice—and truth!"

"You poor child," I said, remembering other women in other witness stands. "But they acquitted you, you say," I told her, saying what I could think of.

"They acquitted me, yes; they did really—in what the jury went out of the way to say about me. But what was the use?"

"The use?" I said after her.

"They could acquit and acquit and acquit. It would be all just the same. I was spoiled just the same for the only thing I was made for—

for marriage. Smeared—all over my soul and body!"

Her hands fell back limp and hopeless into her lap again. "Oh, what's the use?" she said in a voice not of a girl but of a hopeless woman of fifty. "What's the use? I said I'd never do like that again!"

She stopped a minute then, controlled herself and went on finally in a quieter voice again.

"All it was, judge, I wanted to show you," she said, "was I was spoiled. I was done for before I started—for the only thing I was fitted for—trained for—expected to do. They came from all over Dell County for that trial—like they do—for a holiday. I was stripped bare, smeared, dragged before them. I was a name that was common—that they whispered and laughed at on the street corners! You know men do—some men—and women too! Even the commonest girl of the meanest white trash in the country was more—more salable for marriage than I was. I was spoiled—ruined—for any man to marry."

She stopped now for a minute and gave a short quick kind of dreadful laugh.

"You know how it is with fine horses, judge," she said. "My mind always goes back to that, I expect. I always loved horses so. I remember when we had one when I was little—a young colt

we were raising to be a great race horse, we thought. It fell—not by its own fault either—by a trifling foolish groom we had—and broke its leg. You know what they do with horses—with a colt like that—when it's no use any more!"

"Don't!" I told her.

"I shouldn't, judge," she said. "That's excusing myself—for what I just started to do, I'm going to get the better of that—only sometimes it seems so hopeless. And that trial, of course that wasn't all—that was only the beginning."

"You don't have to go on," I said, "if you don't feel like it. I can see—a little—from this on. From what your mother said."

"No, judge," she said, "that's what I'm here for—to tell you. Because—well, because I think you ought to know—after everything. It's only right you should, sir. Because I want you to, sir—and it's a satisfaction to me to tell it to you, to have somebody understand I'm not quite either a knave or a fool, sir. Especially after all these months of sitting silent, masquerading.

"You see how it was, sir," she went on. "I was spoiled—hopelessly spoiled. Instead of being worth something to my mother—to the family, after all its going down, all the terrible expense of

that trial—I was just a detriment and expense. I was worse than that really, you can see, judge, probably, if you think. I was worse because my mother—is what she is. Not so bad really, judge. She means well, but she never can understand about me, truly. She'd planned, I expect, so much, all those years that she had nothing—and expected so much for me. And then too, you understand, sir," she told me, a faint smile coming on her lips again. "You must remember she's a Fairborn, sir, and Fairborns never give up—fight to the last ditch, sir."

"We have a great plenty of Fairborns in the South," I said. "That's one thing they can't say —that we lack courage."

"No, sir," she answered. "But even mother could see I couldn't marry—not in Dell County —now. And so——"

"She got out and came away," I broke in, meaning to save her what I could. "Your mother told me about that."

"Yes. So she decided to take me somewhere else—where it wasn't known—where what she calls my—my good looks——"

"Your great and remarkable beauty, ma'am," I told her.

"Whatever it is!" she said. "But then, naturally, we had to have dresses."

"And she got involved and tied up with this dressmaker," I said, "the way she told me."

"Yes. And then we went on to Louisville," she said, and stopped; and I stopped with her.

"I wonder if you can understand—if anybody can understand," she asked me finally, "how I felt then. I had just been through that thing—that trial. I was sore, bruised all over. There was only one thing in the world I wanted to do; to run and hide and hide and hide! Instead——" she said, and stopped again.

"She brought you forward," I prompted her.

"Instead, judge, I was stood up—for sale. Before every eye she could get on me. I could hear her talking, chattering—about me, my hair, my clothes, my shoulders! I don't want to blame my mother, judge. She is a good woman—she means well. She thinks what she does is right, I expect. Only she was reared that way—thinking of nothing but clothes and looks and marriage—that's all—like a lot of others! And she was nervous and high-strung and all excited by what happened. And she's not herself, truly—not the way you saw her, judge—chattering so. She's not the way she used to be. But she kept on, though, just the same, talking, chattering, just the same about me. When all I wanted all the time was to be buried—covered up somewhere!

And all the time, too, I knew it was so perfectly useless—what she was trying to do. That sooner or later it would catch up with her—the real truth—what I was. It was all so perfectly silly and useless—and so dishonest."

"Dishonest?"

"If anybody had really married me—and found out afterward—the way she meant to do!"

I sat and watched her till she went on again.

"But what could I do—with her, and Robert Lee—everybody fixed like they were—everything gone smash with us? And she always with the same old idea in her head that I could help get us all out—the family—by marrying—making that old brilliant marriage she always talked and dreamed about. Could I help going on—when she begged so—and talked to me—telling me after all that it had happened, in a way, on account of me—that Robert Lee had acted just to protect me and the Fairborn honour?

"And then, too, after all, what difference did it make? I was gone—nothing anyway now!"

She stopped, staring at the wall across from her.

"Did you ever have that dream—that dream they say almost everybody has sometime—of running—without your clothes on—through some public place? Some strange dreadful public place

—trying, trying to hide—and you can't! And all the people whispering and pointing their fingers at you?"

"I have, yes," I said. "I expect everybody has—sometime in their lives."

"Then you know how I felt, in a way—day after day, waiting—for that thing—that trial over again—that shame—to come again. If it had been any use, judge. If it hadn't been so perfectly silly from the first. If it hadn't been so sure to come out.

"And then it came—right away—it came out in Louisville—from that dressmaker, that disgusting Gluber. But you can't blame him, either, judge can you?"

"Why not?" I asked, keeping my eye always on her—her serious, tragic face, her expensive clothes, her gay parasol in her lap—not yet paid for—all still technically the property of A. Gluber, Costumer.

"According to his lights," she said. "For I don't doubt, judge, that mother gave him some mighty queer ideas about our property—how much we had?"

I nodded, and she went on, seeing that I understood.

"And you can't blame her for that, either. That's the strange thing to me, how everything's

happened—always so natural—just according to what kind of folks we all were and this man, this Gluber, was. That was his regular business—doing what he did; that was what he had always done—scaring women."

"Scaring women?"

"Yes. Selling clothes to women whose husbands wouldn't give them what they wanted; to stage women; and other women, I expect, judge, not so good. Selling them more then they ought to have and then scaring them every way—by threatening, by telegraphing, by writing anonymous letters about anything he could—to people they just couldn't have know. It's strange," she said, "how things happen—how they go against you out of nothing," she said; and stopped, thinking.

"And so this dressmaker," I said finally, "drove you out of Louisville."

"Yes," she answered, waking up, "by those letters. And so we changed our name back to mother's and came here to this smaller town, thinking Gluber wouldn't know—wouldn't find us maybe, Though I knew—I was always sure myself—he would," she said, and stopped again—and went on.

"We had just this little bit of money left—these few hundreds of dollars—I don't know exactly how much! And she had sold everything in Dell

County now—she had to. We'd burned our bridges all behind us, judge. She'd just bet all she had—all we any of us had—on that same old thing, that brilliant marriage for me that she'd never had for herself.

"Well," she said, "judge, that's all! I expect you know the rest—how we came here—and about Mr. Gordon. How he—fancied me—and was going—to take me! And that was worse, judge."

"Worse?"

"It was cheating—about me. Think how it would have been when he found out—about me, as he would have to, some day. Think how you'd feel—in my place. Not just being sold, but cheating—when you sold yourself. But I didn't care by that time. I was too desperate, I expect—too tired out, too kind of numb all over, sir, to care about anything then. And mother couldn't see, anyway—and she was too desperate too, I expect."

I thought of them while she was speaking—the two strange, strange-acting women—this White Shoulders and the Scarlet Cockatoo—how they had set us wondering and the women whispering in the corners.

"And then finally," she was going on, "that day came along—that day of victory. For me!" she said, stopping in a short hard laugh again.

"And then you know how that Gluber came at the end—and I saw him there!"

"Didn't she prepare you?" I asked her. "Your mother? Didn't she give you any warning?"

"No, sir. She didn't expect him to stay; he told her he wouldn't. She thought she had it all arranged. And then he stayed to make sure."

"Sure?"

"About Captain Gordon—about my engagement—if it was the way she said. She'd told him—promised him so much in the past, I expect, he thought he'd stay to see!"

"To see?"

"About announcing my engagement."

"Then it was true?"

"What?"

"That you were going to announce it that day?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "But not now—that's all done of course. If she had only told me, warned me," she went on, "I could have stood it, I believe. But all at once, to look down into that face—to see it all rising up again—that man—that time in Louisville—that trial—and that lawyer with the red hair and those little green eyes and that voice, asking me those terrible questions, judge. I heard it all—I went through it all over again

in those thirty seconds before I fainted then, sir. I couldn't stand it, that's all."

She stopped a minute.

"And then you know—mother told you—the letters started again, like they did at Louisville. And then I did that foolish thing—that caused you so much trouble and danger—that I'm here to apologize for to you, sir."

"Apologize?" I said.

"Yes, sir, apologize a thousand times. For I oughtn't to have done it, sir, I know. To have made you all that trouble—and to do that myself! To lay down and quit, sir. I'm utterly ashamed of what I did. To quit like that—especially, sir, when you're a Fairborn," she said, with a slow kind of smile, half mocking and half serious, coming on her face again.

"You certainly," I told her, "don't have to apologize to me, Virginia."

She sat looking off awhile before answering me.

"There is one thing though, judge," she said, "that I reckon I might say for myself. Not to excuse myself—nothing could do that. But I do want to say to you, sir, that I didn't do that that night—I didn't set out to do it purposely. In a way it just happened by impulse.

"It's nights, judge," she went on explaining after a little while more, "that's the worst; that I

go over that trial again, sir. Especially that lawyer talking about me. I can see him so, in the dark—hear his voice—those questions—those names he called me. I expect he made scars all over me! Not my body; deeper down. And when I get through hearing him, judge, in the dark, quite often I get up and light the gas—to stop it, sir."

"I understand," I said, studying her.

"Well, sir," she went on, "all it was, sir, was that that night, after mother went, I got to hearing him especially bad. He was talking again especially bad about me; and I got to crying—and all worn out. I cried for an hour or so, and then I got up finally to light the gas."

"Yes," I prompted her after awhile.

"And when I turned it on the match, sir, went out—through carelessness—before I could light it. And then I thought—the thought came to me, what if I didn't? What if I didn't light it?" she said, after sitting thinking a minute. "And then—I didn't—that's all! I didn't light it. I just hurried back and stumbled over a chair and crawled into bed and pulled the sheets over my head like I did when I was a little girl—and waited!"

"And left the window open!" I said, understanding that part at last.

"Wasn't it silly, judge?" she answered. "I didn't think of that or anything, except how miserable I was. How I couldn't keep on and go through that again—be stripped bare again—before everybody—for nothing!"

"You poor child," I said to her. For that's all she was, I could see now naturally—a poor desperate driven child in the body of a woman.

"I don't mean," she answered me after a minute or so more, "to excuse myself. I can't. But I really didn't set out to do it. I think you ought to know that. And I certainly won't do it over again. I want you to know that too. For I want your good opinion, sir—so far as I can have it. For I value it a great heap, sir—especially after what you've done for me. And I wanted to acquaint you, before it all comes out some way, sir, with what little excuse I had for doing what I did—and just the fix I found myself in. I wanted to show you just what I said at first was true. I'm spoiled—just like I told you I was at first—for living, for the only thing I was ever made fit for—for marrying—for looks. I can't marry, it's foolish to think so. Nobody could now—but just my mother!

"But on the other hand, judge," she said, "I've found out another thing. I can't hope to live, really, ever—and be happy like other women are.

I know that. But I can't honourably die, either. I haven't got the right to die—my life don't belong to me—not with mother and Robert Lee fixed the way they are—with the possibility that somehow some strange miracle might happen—about me, for them!"

"Where is he now?" I asked her.

"Who?"

"Robert Lee—your brother?"

"He's in prison, sir. Penitentiary—for just a short term. He'll be out, sir, very soon now—and he'll have to be helped all we can—to start all over again. He never was a very strong-acting boy. Mother spoiled him!"

"Let me ask you, Virginia," I said, "what do you expect you can do now?"

"I'm going on, I expect," she said, with the stolid hopeless look settling back again on her face, "till this thing breaks out again some way. But in the meanwhile I won't think until it happens. I've had enough of thinking—I can't any more, judge. I'm just going on till it comes."

"Your mother," I made the suggestion, "has gone up to St. Louis."

"Yes, sir. She thinks she can put him off—that Gluber—some way."

"I figured that would be it," I said.

"Yes, sir. But even if she does, what can we do?"

"I want to ask you something more, Virginia, if you will permit me," I said, making a guess at what she was thinking. "If you will permit a man old enough to be your grandfather, Virginia. Let me ask you a kind of delicate question."

"Go ahead, sir," she said, setting her big eyes on me.

"Your money," I said—"how is that going to hold out?"

"It's getting pretty low, sir," she told me.

"Now I've heard what you told me, Virginia," I began to tell her, "with a lot of interest and sympathy, ma'am, and while I don't know now just what I can do, I'm going to help you—all I can."

"You've helped me, sir," she told me. "More'n you should already."

"No," I said. "Far from it," I told her. "And as I was going to say to you, I don't see just what other way I could be of any great service to you,—in any big way, like I'd like to be. But there's one way I can see. If I can be of any pecuniary assistance to you, at any time,——" I said.

"Judge, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I gave you the impression, sir——" she said, starting to get up.

"No, ma'am. No impression about it. I simply thought—if I could help!"

She stood there looking at me under her big straw hat brim.

"I'm obliged to you, judge," she said. "I certainly am. But there won't be anything you can do. It'll be all out and all over in just a little while now. And then we'll be through!"

"Maybe, then," I told her, "you might need help of some kind more than ever."

And then she thanked me and refused again "Nobody can help us, judge," she said. "Not really, sir. Nothing. Nothing but a miracle."

"Will you do this, anyhow?" I asked her. "Will you let me know, from time to time, how things are going with you?"

"Yes, sir, I will," she said finally. "I'll do that—and mighty gladly too. But that wasn't what I came here for, sir—not to beg or borrow any help from you, sir. I came here—to thank—to thank you—and to apologize. And to show you just the fix I was in. That I wasn't quite so bad maybe, as I looked to you—and might look later, when this thing will all be coming out. That I wasn't—as bad—as everybody will try to say. That neither of us, sir, are really so bad——" she said, and stopped—for the simple reason she couldn't go on.

"Virginia, my child," I said, "I want to tell you something. I've lived a long while, my girl, and I've seen a good many folks. And I haven't sat watching men and women all my life without knowing a good woman when I see one. I may look that way. But I'm no such fool as that. I like you. I'm sorry for you. I'm going to help you somehow. And I'm free to say so."

And after that—after she broke down a little bit, the way women do—she went away again, with her face still and impassive and growing pale again. I saw her from my window going on down the street with her fine clothes and hat and big bright-figured parasol—that weren't paid for. And all the men turning and looking at her as she walked along, not looking at them or anything else in particular; thinking, I expect, in spite of herself, of what was coming next—of the snare she was in and couldn't get out of.

Then as I stood there in my window looking I heard down the street back of her a familiar noise—the barking of that Child of Hell, that great racing machine of Cole Hawkins. It came up and stopped by the curb beside where the girl was walking on alone—stopped the way Cole Hawkins managed it—within a fraction of an inch of where he wanted it to be.

He spoke to her, and after a minute more she

got in and they drove off—sweeping round, turning back under my window again. She was smiling at him, I could see—a real genuine smile, the smile of a young girl.

The men on the sidewalk stopped and looked after them.

XII

THE day following that the mother was back from her trip—her trip on business to her old home town, as she told our curious friends at the boarding house.

"You didn't mention St. Louis to any one, did you, judge?" she said to me that afternoon when she was in my office again.

"Madam," I said, "you can trust me, I expect, that much—in business matters, anyhow."

"I knew that, judge. I assumed that, sir," she told me. "But if you had it would have been utterly my fault, for I neglected to say one word to you about it."

"How did you come out, ma'am," I asked her, "on your mission?"

"Judge," she said, her face lighting up like I hadn't seen it for days, not since before the day of victory, anyhow, "you did me another very great favour, sir, in that opinion you gave me. The greatest favour, I believe, I ever had done to me. I went right to him—to Gluber—and told him just what you said I ought to do to him over that contract."

I watched her. Her voice was more real and genuine—less forced; her eyes were brighter—even the colour on her hat and the rouge on her cheeks looked better.

"What did he do?" I asked her. "Cancel the whole thing?"

"Well, no, sir," she said. "Not exactly that! But something just as good. I made a kind of compromise."

"I don't want to be inquisitive, ma'am," I said, "but what is something just as good—if you don't mind about telling me? Did he cut it down—the amount of your debt?"

"Well, no, sir," she said, with a little hitch. But he did something just as good—for me. He's arranged to wait for me—till I get the money handy."

"Well, ma'am," I held on, "I don't want to be officious, but wouldn't it have been better—wouldn't you have made better terms if you'd been represented by a lawyer in that?"

"Let me ask you something back, on that same line," she said, looking up with those sharp black eyes of hers, "before I answer that. If you'd been in that case—as a lawyer—wouldn't you have insisted on his getting out, giving up everything on that claim?"

"I might—very likely."

"That's just it. That's just what I wouldn't take the risk of—of getting him so he might go and write those letters again—which you could never prove he did. Spoil everything for us!"

"If you went at him right," I started to say, thinking how women always handled a thing like that—"if you went at that kind—threatened him with what would happen——"

"Besides," she said, breaking in, "I got what I wanted, anyway. I've got it fixed—I've made a new bargain, so I won't have to pay till it's convenient for me, anyway. That's the one thing I had to have, judge."

Her eyes looked up into mine again—a sharp, feverish look, like any other gambler's, I thought to myself. "When it's convenient—when will that be?" I wondered to myself, but I didn't ask her that, naturally—if she didn't want to tell me by herself.

"You threatened him with criminal suit?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "And got just the bargain that I wanted, thanks to you, sir!"

"Bargain," I thought to myself. "I wonder what?" But that was for her to state of course —not for me to ask.

"Well, madam," I said, getting up, "I hope I've been of some service, and I'm glad you're

satisfied—and I'll watch how you come out with more than ordinary interest, ma'am."

If she didn't want to take me into her confidence about her future plans, that was her right, but it seemed to me then it was fairly obvious that she was excited with her old hopes once more—her expectations for the girl; on general principles, perhaps, but more likely now in a particular quarter. I wondered then if she didn't have her eye on another possibility—the possibility that seemed to me so remote then—that young devil, Cole Hawkins. He was—not entirely unknown to the world—engaged now in dragging that girl round in that car of his, that Child of Hell—giving her a good time, for pity's sake, for being sorry for her, like he had said he would. But nothing certainly seemed less likely to me than any hope for the girl in that direction—if that was what the woman had now in her feverish imagination. Not with a boy with just his angle on women—and the only relation with the only kind of women that that wild harum-scarum kind establishes—especially when they are as reckless as he had been since the war.

But I said nothing. After all, what business was it of mine, especially if the woman, this Mrs. Fairborn, or Mrs. Pitman, or the Scarlet Cockatoo —whatever you wanted to call her—chose to push

me out of her affairs, as she had in making her new arrangement, which she had only told me part of—the part she wanted me to know? But naturally now I could not help watching this new and not entirely open turn in her speculation as it developed—if it could develop.

The group in Mrs. Tusset's—the watching, whispering women and their secret-service agent, Cupid Calvert—were, I could see, not inactive in investigating the matter along whatever lines of research they could establish. They were trying St. Louis now, I gathered, from several things I overheard; but, I judged by what I caught, with poor success. Being on the inside myself, it was more or less amusing to see them groping round upon the matter.

I was, if the exact truth is required, not without curiosity myself—not only as to the outcome but the details of the whole rather extraordinary case.

It just so happened that I was in Louisville that month, invited up to make a speech there before the state bar association, and I inquired round, and after dinner I found there was a man there—an attorney—from round Dell County or that end of the state; and I satisfied my curiosity to the point of asking him about the Pitman case and the part that this girl, this White Shoulders, had

taken in it. He bore her story out in all particulars.

"That case, sir," he said to me, "was a crime against civilization. This Singleton—this Colonel Singleton, he called himself—was a bad lot—a bad actor, as they speak of them today. He was in politics some—and business—and he had a lot of relations and friends and political debtors. The old clan spirit was in the thing, sir, naturally. It would be—in this case. They were out—just as the girl told you—to wreck them—to get revenge, any way possible. And they worked it so that they went outside and got a special prosecutor to help out the local man.

"You know, I expect, judge, even better than I do, how it is in these small back counties, where nobody's got much on their mind for amusement—especially after the crops are in—in court times. A trial like that ain't a trial; it's more like a horse race. All—everybody turns out and drives in, and they all take sides one way or the other. It was worse—this one—more of it in this case than I ever saw, sir.

"They went outside, sir, the prosecution, like I told you—to make sure. And they imported this special man from outside—an unprincipled pup. If I'd seen my way to it he'd been disbarred long ago. Vitriolic—makes a specialty of vitriol!

You know the kind. There's nothing he would hesitate to bring up or put a witness through. And the more he says the more it seems to infuriate him against them, until he gets beside himself—in the kind of orgy of fury against the witness that our courts too often allow a lawyer like that. An indulgence of a personal taste for cruelty about as brave and noble and as dangerous to the man involved as a drunken poor white beating his wife in a lonely backwoods cabin. But you know the kind of lawyer I mean, judge, without specifications."

I nodded. I had seen them operating, naturally—plenty of them.

"Well, sir," he said, "the theory of the prosecution—this man's theory of the case—was that the whole thing was a cold-blooded murder, arising out of a family conspiracy to force this man to marry the girl. And naturally they bent everything possible toward proving that—the actions of everybody involved. And to tell the truth there was some superficial corroboration of that theory in the mother's acts. Everybody knew in the district how she'd thrown the girl at him—and had laughed at it for months. But when it came to the boy and the girl herself, there was nothing—not a scintilla of evidence—against her. And that made it worse for her in a way."

"Worse?" I said.

"Yes. For the less his theory worked out in the case the more this Fingart, this red-headed vermin of an attorney, went after her. There was nothing conceivable, sir, he didn't put that girl through. It makes my gorge rise now to think of it, and what that damned political judge they had permitted. By God, sir, the girl wasn't but seventeen—and like a child.

"Finally, of course, this man Fingart overreached himself. The jury not only gave the boy the lightest possible sentence but they went outside their province and said something about the girl—disapproving the attacks and insinuations on her—till the judge stopped them.

"But that—you know about how much good that did. They'd acquitted her, you could say, but what good was that to her now? After all, men are a little sensitive about what folks are going to say about the woman they are going to marry. And you know what a lawyer can do with a few questions! There was no more evidence against her than the Angel Gabriel. But for all that, she was made public as the town jail, and a young man round there was about as apt to marry her as the public hangman.

"The girl," he went on, "was undoubtedly free and clean—and the boy, too—from anything the

prosecution claimed—from any idea of conspiracy. But the mother, of course, was different—in a way. There was no doubt that she hoped the man would marry the girl for her looks."

"Did you know that—the mother?" I asked him.

"Leonora Fairborn!" he told me. "I should say I did! I was raised with her. A lightweight—a bunch of ribbons. She never grew over sixteen years old."

"She means well enough, I expect, from what little I've seen of her," I said.

"Well, yes, she means well. But she never grew up. They don't—that kind. I tell you, judge," he went on—I could see he was quite a bit of a theorist—"I always held that there's not more than one woman in three that's capable of bearing and rearing a child—especially a female child—and especially the mothers that have been raised up and filled with that balderdash, Sir Walter Scott romance, that's been such a curse and a detriment to the women of our generation and our section in general. After so long, I always claimed the court ought to step in in about every two out of three cases and take the child away from them on the ground that the mother is mentally, morally and sentimentally incompetent to rear them. Like this case!"

"I expect the woman was desperate," I said—

"the way things turned out with her, if I understand it right, after she married poorly herself."

"Yes. You can say that for her. She did marry for love, for romance, herself. And from all accounts Bob Pitman wasn't exactly a capital prize in the marriage lottery," he told me. "And after awhile, I believe, it got to be a kind of obsession with her—marrying off that girl right. I'll be mighty interested seeing how she works out this present campaign that you've been telling me about," he said.

"She's a resourceful and vigourous speculator in matrimony," I told him.

"Desperate!"

"That's it," I told him.

XIII

MRS. FAIRBORN'S speculation, I should have said myself at that time, was never more desperate; in fact it seemed it must almost certainly now be coming to its final collapse. They had, without a question, come in the first place to the end of the financial shoe string on which they were operating. Their money must be about gone. No matter what bargain this Scarlet Cockatoo, so-called, had made with her hounding, blackmailing dressmaker, there must be from their circumstances a distinct time limit to their operations in the local marriage market.

Not only that, however. Since their setback and defeat on Victory Day their field was very much restricted. The whispering women were still active, and their sibilant suggestions were now more generally accepted among the less suspicious and more susceptible and idealistic men—more so, at least, in matters where women are concerned. The reputation hounds, as Cupid Calvert called them all—generously sharing his own nickname with others—were now all hot on the trail. All

the local women—those in Mrs. Tusset's in particular—were busy trying to pick up the back scent of the mysterious suspects—especially since the receipt of the anonymous letter with its suggestion concerning the Pitman murder. And it could be only a question of time when they would get what they were working for; in fact they would doubtless have already done this, I believe and still believe, if it had not been for the women's change of name and the inaccessibility of Dell County from our section.

Fairborn Courthouse may have had postal service; I assume it did have. But probably no more; and it was as yet not even sure—from their viewpoint, I mean—that the trial mentioned in the letter was held there. And so, for the moment, the hunt was suspended, while the Fairborn or Pitman women moved as fast as possible on with their own hunting.

They were fortunate in one respect in both their operations—in their selection of their men. If Gordon, with his exclusive nature and high self-esteem, was inaccessible to gossip and scandal—the last person in the world to hear it—Cole Hawkins was something more. If he learned it he would take sharp satisfaction in denying it and flouting it. It would spur him on in the opposite direction, defying the squawkers, as he

profanely called our better local women; and making it a questionable and dangerous operation for any man who might bring him information which did not quite please him.

And he was especially ugly against the social arbiters who took counsel together in the hall at Mrs. Tusset's—"that hen yard, cackling and quacking and hissing together"—with Cupid Calvert, whom he particularly despised.

So the chief actor now concerned with the two women's future could be counted not only to fly in the face of the best-informed public opinion but, if possible, to run a course directly contrary to it. And this was a factor in the case, I have no doubt, that the women—especially that Mrs. Fairborn—understood long before I did—or before I even realized the temporary hopefulness of her fortune—as she now saw it.

"Do you know what's happening, judge, in that thing?" Belle Davis asked me in the hallway again before dinner.

"No, ma'am."

"It's the screamingest thing that ever came to pass on this earth."

"What is?"

"They're reforming him!" she told me. "White Shoulders and the Cockatoo are breaking Cole Hawkins of drinking."

"Fact, judge!" said Cupid Calvert. "I know it. He's cutting out the rude and riotous—all for the sake of White Shoulders!"

"You ought not to allow that," I told him. "You ought to discredit them and drive them out of town somehow first!"

"You'd think, judge," said Julia Blakelock, "to hear you talk, you were defending them."

"I'll say myself," Belle Davis came in, "if they stop him from what he's been doing the past six months—if only from what he's been doing with that machine—that Child of Hell of his—they'll have done a big kindness to this town."

"If they keep him off the sidewalks and going home looping the loops round the telephone poles and lamp-posts, we'll have fewer little children to pick out of his front wheels," Cupid contributed.

"He hasn't killed anybody yet, drunk or sober—you've got to admit that," I told him.

"No," he said; "he's a wizard with that thing. You've certainly got to admit that. But you always hate to see a drunk going staggering home late at night—eighty miles an hour. It makes you kind of nervous. It does me."

"He's a menace to the whole community, judge," said Julia Blakelock, "and you know it!"

"He certainly would be," I told her, "if half the things they say about him are true."

For what they said about him those last few months was aplenty—since he came back home, with his chagrin and disappointment and—I sometimes thought—his shame for not getting into the war; and his fool boy's hunger to show off—what he might have done if he'd been there!

"War," old Sam Barsam used to say, "is just nothing but the king of games—that's all. It's nothing but a playing against death—like most games that a boy of spirits wants to show he can do—breaking the worst colt or climbing the cliff or swimming the river. You don't fight the enemy so much in war as you fight death. There's your real enemy—to cheat and flout and slip away from, thumbing your nose. You're fighting death—the same old boy's game—in war. That's what always makes it so popular with boys," he claimed.

It was that, I assume, that Cole Hawkins set out to do in the stunts they claimed he tried with that great motor car of his—especially when he had been drinking—setting his brakes and whirling on slippery streets; skidding round the corners, grazing niggers' wagons with his fenders, scaring them hollering crazy; running up banks and into yards. For he could handle the thing to the fraction of an inch. It was an instrument of precision in his hands.

If he couldn't loop the loop and show them

spinning nose dives in the air, anyhow he could still show what he thought of death—on wheels —and what he might have done if they'd ever once let him loose on the Germans—and incidentally the skill they might have had at their service if they'd had sense enough to keep him, in spite of his damaged leg, and sent him out in an aëroplane to take Berlin single-handed.

One of the most amusing things they told about him was about his handling of the so-called road hogs, a thing which to my mind showed a lot about him, in more than one way. He had a special grudge against that kind of cattle—always seemed to hear about them and store his mind with them, some way—about every fat and insolent fellow with a heavy car that crowded a poor farmer in his so-called flivver off the road. And when he was a little drunk he would go out looking for them. That was his amusement—to wipe off their brand-new shiny mud guards from them with that battered heavy Child of Hell. He was the terror of half the fat underbred drivers of cars, these so-called road hogs, in the county. It was the talk of the section—the neatness and dispatch with which he did his work on them. So much so that there was quite a change in road manners in our vicinity. For these folks not only hated to be banged up by him

on the road but they hated still worse to come into court and be laughed out again, with what he and his lawyers always seemed to know about them and could prove up from other people.

"I've seen him myself," Cupid Calvert claimed, "going home at night when he was drunk as a boiled owl, go up and wipe off a nice new shiny mud guard, as handy as you'd pick up your napkin from the table."

"But now there's no more of that. He's got company for his night riding," said Julia Blakelock.

That was how they were known now—the two —at Mrs. Tusset's—as The Night Riders. For by this time they were out continually evenings —tearing round the country in that Child of Hell, roaring down country roads like a scared thunderstorm.

"Well, anyhow, if she can do that—keep him straight at night—I'll say this," said Belle Davis —"she's done a big thing. And if she reforms him—gets him to quit drinking—she's done a miracle. If she straightens out Cole Hawkins, I say she's entitled to him."

"She can have him, and welcome, for all of me," said Julia Blakelock.

"I always knew it," said Cupid Calvert, with his sunny smile to the Davis girl.

"Knew what?"

"That you were of a deeply romantic nature, Belle. That sometime sooner or later you'd let it destroy your poor little sense of humour."

And Julia Blakelock laughed—rather briefly.

"Two adventuresses," she said, "Belle, reforming anybody—Cole Hawkins especially! You're funny!"

"It's more than funny, Belle," said Cupid. "It's humouresque."

I must confess that at the time it seemed to me myself a somewhat eccentric stroke of fate—to put it mildly—for these two women, that girl, under the circumstances—her past and her present and the few days remaining now to her in the town, in all human probability—to have started consciously or unconsciously a movement to reform Cole Hawkins.

It might be a pose—as my friends in Mrs. Tusset's clearly intimated—one of a variety of poses which "that kind" would use to snare their prey. The whispering women were better qualified to give expert testimony on that subject than I. But it struck me, if it was true—which I did not know of my own knowledge then—that it would be a wicked situation to see develop; and a very dangerous one from the standpoint of the two women, working with a character just like Cole

Hawkins, when he once came to know the truth.

I did see now that something was developing there. It would have taken a blind man to miss it finally—even if the two, Hawkins and that Snowy Shoulders, had not been together in that car all the time—merely from watching the facial expressions of the principals of the transaction. Cole Hawkins, if not reformed, was becoming at least half broken, as Belle Davis said, to human society, and the vociferous satisfaction of the mother, the Scarlet Cockatoo, "back in her old voice," as Calvert said, was scarcely more obvious than the silent pleasure or anticipation, or relief from grinding apprehension, which showed in the face of White Shoulders at the approach of the booming car on the road and in our driveway.

I had a clew, I could assume, to the girl's feelings in part, from her confidence to me concerning that apparently unlikely but not really remarkable hunger of hers for motion, freedom—horses—and, I might assume, cars; that girlish instinct, grown stronger—always intensified, it might be expected. —through those months of strain, sitting silent, fearful in the centre of hostile watching eyes, waiting for some new shame to overwhelm her.

In a way, if you analyse the probabilities of the case, there were quite promising foundations for a possible mutual understanding between these two.

Their tastes were not so different; they were both caught in a rather extraordinarily ugly corner, for their time of life; and with the more vigourous reaction which youth gives to trouble they might fairly both be said to be desperate young creatures and so to have at least the mutual sympathy of desperation, which might easily develop into a sympathy of another more ardent kind.

They talked very little together, it was claimed by those who observed them on their drives—they would naturally in that noisy machine. Merely passed on their way by the staring bystanders—and everything else that moved upon the road—two silent, moody, striking figures, apparently satisfied with the mere knowledge of each other's presence and a general mutual delight in speed.

So it was not necessary, I concluded, upon final consideration, to assume any further conscious posing or trickery on the part of the girl at least—in the way of insincere and hypercritical attempts at reforming our unregenerate young fellow townsman, Cole Hawkins—unlikely as that conclusion might seem to the casual observer.

If you do not hold the theory that "the only heaven we know about lies just in behind our eyes," as the godless, free-thinking old Judge Cato Pendleton used to remark, "in the illusions of the individual human brain," yet you can scarcely

doubt his claim that "the original angel factory was the brain of the young male between sixteen and, say, twenty-six. Put any nice, clean, sweet-looking girl beside one long enough," he used to go on, "and you have an angel—provided she has sufficient presence of mind not to talk with too great freedom."

That process then—that "spontaneous generation of an angel" of Judge Pendleton's—was taking place, I believed I could begin to see, now that the matter was being called to my attention—in the distinctly unangelic mind of Cole Hawkins. It is that very kind, in fact, I have not infrequently observed, who tend to set up and glorify good women beyond all reason and deserts—maybe as a kind of reaction from their own sins. This not uncommon development manifested itself in Cole Hawkins to me in the not unusual form for such folks as he of self-abasement before the new creation.

I saw the boy perhaps more than any other man in the town did, and more intimately—my office, where I spend most of my own leisure, offering maybe a convenient stopping place on the main street for male callers of various kinds, including quite a number of those loneliest of all human creatures, the men of all ages who hang round hotel corridors and cigar stores, because they

have no other place to go and lay their head.

The subject of the angel was approached as usual, not directly, but, as it not unnaturally is, by casual and theoretical discussion of purely hypothetical cases, based upon a consideration of the speaker's own character.

"When a man has lived as I have—the past year or two, in particular, judge," Cole Hawkins asked me—"what do you think? Do you think he ever can be fit—can he ever straighten himself up so a nice, decent, pure, quiet girl would ever think of marrying him?"

"It has been done, I expect, son," I said to him—smiling the fraction of a well-hidden smile under my mustache.

"Yes, I know, judge," he told me. "If you cover up everything and hide yourself—as you can, naturally, with a fine, pure, inexperienced girl. But that's one thing I hate above all things on earth—and I never stooped to yet: Lying; showing out that I'm different than I really am."

"I'd go your bond on that, Cole," I said, "where maybe I wouldn't on some other things—like assault and battery and mayhem and general breach of the peace."

"I don't know, judge," he went on, shaking his head, considering his sins. "I've been running pretty mighty wild—especially here lately. I've

been through hell the past twelve months, and take my word for it, judge, I've been scraping bottom. If there wasn't anything I could think of to do, I'd hire a man to sit up nights and discover it for me."

And about that time he would change the subject. He was shy, like that species is apt to be.

He couldn't help, though, speaking of the girl, praising her, defending her against the attacks he had heard at first about her—a few attacks on any good-looking girl, if they are not too bad, being one of the most stimulating of all help in the process of angel making.

"They make me laugh, those hens in council," he told me, "those whispering women, as you call them, judge, with their talk about those dressmaker's bills. I expect if every woman that owes dressmakers more than they could pay was put in jail herself, the houses in this town would be kept empty—one time or another."

"There'd be quite an exodus, maybe," I agreed with him.

"And for that matter," he went along, "you know and I know it's the mother in that combination that's responsible for all that—for the dress part. That's clear on the face of it. That

girl don't care that for dressing! She shows it by her actions. She'd rather keep quiet and out of sight any day than show herself round."

"I expect that's right," I told him.

"No, sir," he said, going on a little further. "Let me tell you something. I'm nobody's fool. I know a good girl when I see one."

I looked at him.

"I ought to," he said. "I've seen enough of the other kind—the past few years."

He stopped, looking off with those moody black eyes of his, trying to stop talking to me about her —and not able to yet.

"She's been through some big trouble—she won't tell just how much; that ain't her style—to holler, judge. But she's got more courage and sand in her little finger than I have in my whole body. She's made me quit drinking already, judge. Maybe before she gets through she'll make a man out of me!"

And then he sat awhile longer. "Oh, I know," he went on then, "what I've been and am—don't fret—and what she is. She's too good for me, that's all."

"If it's my cue—if you're calling on me for a speech," I said when he stopped off and stared at the floor, "I'll say now that you might go some

distance farther and fare considerably worse right now than to get this girl you are now talking about."

And that naturally didn't displease him.

"You're right there, judge," he told me warmly. "And let me tell you something else—if I ever hear any loose talk round me, like there started there for a minute after that day, that Pageant of the Roses," he said, setting those black reckless eyes of his on mine, "there'll be some trouble starting just right after that in this town."

And following this remark he took up his hat and clapped it on that black mop of hair of his and went out—thinking he'd shown his personal feelings enough, probably, for that one session.

"A wounded angel," as old Judge Pendleton said in that private lecture of his on the Illusions of Courtship, "is about the most appealing object we have to any right-minded young man."

I could begin to see then that we had a pretty pronounced case of this in our midst; and it began to be a serious question already, in my mind, just where this matter was going to lead us.

The whispering women, the whole pack of reputation hounds, were certainly not, could not be far distant, with Calvert's own able aid, from the trail of the two women back through St. Louis to Dell County. They were trying now, through Calvert,

I was quite sure, to get in touch with the information that could be had through A. Gluber, Costumer. And, when they once achieved their object and began spreading the glad news, complications might easily be at hand, I could now see—knowing Cole Hawkins generally and his present state of mind, as I did—which might be highly unpleasant, if not serious, to more parties than one.

XIV

I WAS not prepared, though—to be right) frank and open with you—for that next turn that the affair took.

The woman, in fact, this Mrs. Fairborn, had seemed in the past week or so to be taking on a new lease of life. She had said nothing definite to me on what was really in her mind, but her looks had more than once told me, in practically so many words: "It's coming out all right, sir."

It was consequently with considerable amazement that I beheld her walking into my office one morning in the extraordinary state—especially for her—of almost inarticulate excitement.

"Judge, sir," she said to me finally, "do you know what's happened, what's occurred now, sir?"

And before I could ask her what had, she had started walking back and forth, back and forth, in the limited confines of my office.

"What has, ma'am?" I managed to ask her finally.

"That wicked, ungrateful child!" she said; and started walking on again, tearing a small lace handkerchief into strips while she did so.

"Sit down, madam," I said to her. "Calm yourself."

But she was beyond taking advice—or even hearing it. She marched up and down the room, a distracted mass of ribbons; her eyes were set, her hair starting loose, her hat starting tilting a little over her red and white face.

"After all these years that I've devoted myself —my whole life. I've lavished everything I've had—everything that heart could desire—on her, and now, in the end—in my need——"

"Madam," I said, going toward her, for I saw now I was dealing with a person beside herself— "madam, take a hold on yourself."

"Do you know what that girl's done?"

"Who?" I asked her.

"Virginia."

"No. What?"

"She's refused—refused the proposal—of that Mr. Hawkins. He's proposed, and she's refused him! Not only that. She won't even see him. Can't be got to see him again!" she said, and started on her march once more.

The moisture even came out through the powder on her vividly contrasted complexion; I expect she began crying some. There were stains of red on her torn handkerchief where she dabbed at her eyes.

"Oh, I never thought—dreamed—it would come to this! That a child would turn, like this, on the mother that bore her—on her own mother—on her own happiness. I never dreamed that such things could be!"

She stopped short, opposite me. "Judge, sir," she said in a shrill appeal, "you've got to help me, sir. I'm come to a desperate pass, sir. I'm in desperate circumstances."

I'm willing," I told her, "madam, to do all that I can. But I've got to know the circumstances first, ma'am. And I can't advise you to advantage, with you a-running and racing up and down my office. Sit down, ma'am. Sit down," I said.

And finally I prevailed upon her to do so.

"Now then, ma'am," I told her, "let's begin right. What are the circumstances?"

"You know what our circumstances are, judge. Or I suppose you do. If not, I'll tell you now, sir," she said. "I've got just seventy-five dollars left in the world. That's my circumstances, sir!"

I waited, now she was launched.

"My boy, sir," she said, going on, "at present is languishing in jail, sir, for circumstances which are connected with my daughter, with the defence and protection of this obstinate, ungrateful girl against calumny."

I waited again.

"Her family," she said, "is ruined. The Fairborns are gone forever—sunk out of sight beneath the waves of adversity and sorrow, sir, like many another of our first families of the South before the war—all because of this mad, crazy, ungrateful girl of mine. For she is crazy, sir, I believe. I firmly believe it, sir!" she said staring at me "If anybody had told me, sir, that this was possible a year ago, I would have said he was mad."

"Just what——" I started asking her. But she hurried again along her own line of thought.

"And this," she said in a wail, "is being a mother! Judge," she said, appealing to me, "I only want justice. I only want what's reasonable. But this is wrong—absolutely wrong. I took that child, sir. I was her mother. I lavished everything on her—my affection, my mind, my soul! I gave her everything that a young girl's heart desires. Dresses, parties, lovely times. She was the most beautiful child, naturally! And no pains in the world were spared by us—by me—to make her perfect, sir—all a refined, high-spirited Southern lady should be. All the little refinements and delicacies that come to a Southern girl, delicately reared in a refined atmosphere of a Southern home. And now——"

"And now?" I prompted, watching her as she dabbed her face again with her reddened handkerchief.

"And now—she is crazy! She is going to ruin us all. In the desperate circumstances that now face us."

"You want me to help you, ma'am," I said, checking her finally. "So you say."

"Yes, sir."

"Well then, if I'm going to," I said, "I'll have to ask you, a little more in detail, just what your circumstances are, I expect. You say all you have left now is seventy-five dollars?"

"Yes, sir. Exactly, sir."

"In the world?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have no property—anywhere?"

"No, sir. Not a dollar. It was all disposed of—at the time of the trial and since—the last of it. And more than that, sir, every other morsel of property—every jewel or personal ornament I possessed—all the Fairborn heirlooms—have all gone now. You understand, sir—everything!"

I understood.

"Everything in the world, sir, to help—to do what I thought a mother should do—to help this ungrateful crazy daughter to be happy throughout her life."

"To help marry her, I understand you to mean."

"Yes, sir. To give her her chance—to make a good and honorable marriage—to marry some lovely high-bred man, worthy of her—of her family—in mind and manners and means. To give her the circumstances she should have, and her mother never did!"

"And to do that," I kept on, "You mortgaged, as I understand you, your whole life—your whole future!"

"Exactly, judge. You've told it exactly right, sir."

"And more than that, I expect," I said, drawing her along, "you've got this debt—this obligation still to that dressmaker in St. Louis—that man Gluber—for her dresses."

"Yes, judge. Yes."

"Just what was the bargain—that last one you made with him?" I asked her. "When you went up that last time to St. Louis? You signed another note, I assume," I said, when she waited, "or something of the kind, to take the place of your previous obligation to him."

"Yes, sir, that was it."

"For a larger sum, maybe," I said, guessing now—to that extent.

"Well, yes, sir. A little larger."

"In what form?" I asked her.

"It was in the form of a demand note," she told me, with an obviously growing reluctance. "But with an understanding about it between us."

"What understanding?"

"Well, in the first place, I demonstrated to him, judge," she said—"I told him what you said I might concerning the illegality of his claim—what could be done to him for his actions. And then I showed him that anyhow we had nothing—no money we could pay him—nothing beyond the dresses he had sold us."

"And so you let him make out a new note—is that it?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir—for a compromise."

"Probably fixed over now so it will hold legally."

"I don't know about that, sir, but we have an understanding between us."

"In writing?" I asked.

"No; verbal, sir. Verbal. But he's fixed so he will carry out our understanding—he'll be compelled to by circumstances. Because he can't do anything else. He can't get anything else from us. We haven't got it!"

"Just what was it—your understanding with this man?" I asked her.

"Well, I told him what the chances were now. How probable it was, if he didn't interfere with

us, that Virginia, sir, would get married. Would be pretty sure to do so—if we were given the chance."

"To whom?"

"Well—to that Mr. Hawkins, probably."

"And so he took the chance with you," I said, "that you'd get the girl married to Hawkins—or somebody."

"Yes, sir."

"In which case he would get a larger sum—a larger stake," I said, seeing the thing. "Whereas in the case of failure he would still have all he would have had before—the right to take back the dresses."

"Yes, sir."

"With a new form of note—that will be better, we can assume, from his standpoint."

"No doubt, sir," she said, watching me.

"It was a good compromise," I said, "I expect, from his standpoint!"

And she didn't say anything.

I sat myself then, thinking of the end—the narrowing end of the blind alley that these two had about reached now—the finish of the strange operations of that female speculator.

"You have seventy-five dollars," I said to her finally. "Enough to pay your board at Mrs. Tusset's two weeks longer, maybe. Then what?"

"I don't know, sir. Unless the sidewalk."

"Haven't you a soul—not a relation?"

"Not a near relation, sir."

"And even the dresses—of the girl—go back to Gluber, as soon as he hears about it," I said.

And she nodded, weeping now, with self-pity, into her torn and reddened handkerchief.

"Well, madam," I said at length, "I could help you somewhat, I expect, financially. You could command me there—to some extent."

And at that she did what I expected she might do: She jumped up and fought me.

"No, sir!" she cried out. "No, sir! We are no objects of charity, sir. We're Fairborns!"

"What is it then?" I asked her. "What is it you believe that I should do?"

"Just one thing—that's all, sir. There's just one thing to be done!"

"What?"

"I want you to consent to see my girl, sir. I want you to say that you'll tell her what she's got to do—for herself, for everybody. To give up her crazy course, sir, and act sensible. She respects you, judge. She respects your opinion tremendously and values your friendship, sir, and she's promised me she would be willing to see and talk with you, sir, if you will consent to see her and advise with her, sir."

"In the first place, madam," I said, "before we go any further, I want to ask you a question: Does this young man—this Hawkins—know all your circumstances—just what you and your daughter have—have encountered in the past few years?"

"Do you mean to say, sir," she wanted to know —"do you mean to insinuate that you think an alliance with my Virginia—with a Fairborn—would be beneath this young man—or anybody in this country, sir?"

"Madam," I said, "I wasn't opening up just that question. I was just bringing before you another question of fact and of policy—which sooner or later you and your daughter would have to look in the face: That sooner or later this man, if he married your daughter, would have to know the circumstances of your daughter—that whole matter of the Pitman trial."

She gave a start when I said this.

"What do you know about that?" she inquired, looking up quickly.

"Only what you—and later your daughter—informed me; and what one subsequent informant has told me."

"There was nothing—against Virginia—absolutely. Even the jury——" she started.

"I understand that," I told her. "All that I

was directing your attention to at this time was that very soon now the details are pretty mighty sure to be known here. I have said nothing whatever myself, naturally, of what I know—to a living soul—but I have reason to believe that others——"

"That Calvert!" she said, going straight to the mark.

"——are making inquiries—in St. Louis—and very likely in Dell County—that in a very short time now will doubtless produce results; and then naturally, this young man Hawkins would know."

"What difference would it make with that harum-scarum boy?"

"It might make a heap of difference, ma'am," I said. "You can't tell. Especially if he knew that you-all had been keeping the thing from him."

"He'd marry her tomorrow," she said.

"He might," I admitted.

"That's what he wanted her to do—begged her to. To run off with him in that car of his and get married on the spot—and she wouldn't do it. And now she won't even see him. She's afraid to, he's so crazy over her. He might drag her away with him anyway."

"Now then, there's a second thing," I told her. "The real main reason I can't interfere, or any one else—or have any right to. I certainly myself

can't be a party, madam, to a bargain to sell a girl —for you or Mr. Gluber or for the sake of any circumstances—no matter how desperate they are; to force your daughter to marry a man she doesn't like!"

"But that's it!" she said, starting up like a wild woman. "That's what's so crazy about the whole thing."

"What?"

"What she says. What she's doing. The reason she gives for not marrying him!"

"What reason?"

"Because she loves him!"

"Won't marry him," I said, "because she loves him?"

"She's mad, that's all," said her mother. "She's raving crazy. I think sometimes I am—or will be pretty quick!" she cried out, starting tearing at the reddened shreds of her handkerchief.

I quieted her down finally; and finally told her I would see the girl—if she wanted to call.

I sat there, after she had restored her complexion and straightened her hat and gone, reflecting deeply on where her tortuous path was taking her —and her extraordinary statement concerning the attitude of the girl—her alleged refusal to marry the man she loved because she loved him!

XV

THE girl was in to see me about half-past three or four o'clock that very evening—dressed up again in one of the gayest of her mortgaged gowns.

"Did you want to see me, judge?" she asked me.

Her face was changed—her whole appearance. She had, it looked to me, more go, more determination to her than I had ever seen in her before.

"I always want to see you, Virginia," I told her. "You're quite a pleasant thing to look at. I don't get many ornaments like you in this old dust heap of an office."

"Judge," she told me, right away, apologizing with her voice, "I didn't mean to be impertinent, sir, but mother did say you'd like to see me if I'd come in."

"I would, yes, Virginia—if you'd like to see me."

"I always want to do that, judge," she told me.

"Sit down, daughter," I told her. "Let's have an old-time chat. It won't do either one of us any harm, I expect."

She sat down opposite me, in that light-coloured gown with big flowers on it. She had more colour

in her face than I ever saw her have—partly maybe from the rose colour that the under part of the brim of her great hat had on it.

"I thought maybe I could help you a little," I said; "but I might be mistaken. If I could, I'd like to."

"I know that, judge," she said. "And I appreciate it, and I want you to know I do too. Go ahead," she said—"whatever you want. If you want to say anything, or ask anything, go ahead, sir."

"I'd like to ask you one or two things," I told her, "if they're not of too personal a nature."

"Go ahead, judge—just as far as you want to," she said, settling herself down and looking at me in the face.

She looked different to me; her whole way of acting was different from that cold, impassive White Shoulders I used to watch sitting round at Mrs. Tusset's. It was a change for the better, that was certain.

"I'm starting off taking you at your word," I said.

"Go ahead."

"Your mother told me," I said then, "that you'd just had a proposal of marriage—from a young friend of mine."

"Yes, sir," she said.

The colour in her face now wasn't all a reflection from that rose-coloured lining in her hat. But she kept her eyes right up to mine.

"And you refused him."

"Yes, sir," she said, keeping her voice and eyes steady.

"I'm sorry for that," I told her, looking up at her suddenly. "I expect it's because you couldn't bring yourself to fall in love with him?"

Her eyes dropped down at this and her face got redder than ever.

"No, sir," she answered me in a low, distinct voice. "That wasn't it."

"What your mother said can't be true, can it?" I went on after a minute. "It can't be that you love him—like she said you did."

"Judge," she said in a slow, serious voice, looking up again, "if you want the truth—I do."

"And you won't marry him—like she said."

"No, sir."

"For that reason she gave. Because you do love him—or so she says. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "That's correct, judge."

"You love him," I said over again, "and you won't marry him—for that reason! Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Why not, ma'am?" I asked her "How do

you reconcile those statements; or are you just plain crazy?"

"No, sir," she said very quietly. "I'm not crazy. I can't—that's all. You wouldn't. No one could. Why, judge, don't you see?"

"See what, ma'am?" I asked her.

"Suppose, judge," she said, "you yourself had the best friend in the world—we'll just say! Would you ever think in the world, judge, of swindling, of cheating him?"

"Cheating him?"

"Yes, sir. Cheating him with the biggest fraud in the whole wide world, sir."

"What fraud's that? What are you driving at?" I asked her.

"Is there any bigger fraud or harm that anybody could put on anybody else than a swindle and fraud in his wife? Is there anything possible where you could harm anybody so much as that?"

I sat stock-still, looking at her.

"Judge," she said, "I'm a swindle from top to toe, sir. My name, the very clothes on my back—everything about me. I'm just a swindle, sir, all over. But I'm not that much of a swindle, sir. I won't swindle the person I love. I'm not sunk that low, sir."

"Look here, Virginia," I started out, "that ain't the reasonable common-sense way to look——"

"Why not?" she broke in on me. She talked now like a different girl—sharp and quick and alive. That was it—like a girl brought to life. "Why not?" she had to know from me. "The fact is you are the one that wants to turn round and be practical."

"How so?" I asked her.

"Isn't it certain sure almost—is there any doubt in the world—that it's all coming out now in a week or two about us—what we've been? Our money's gone, for one thing; and for another, I know—I'm just as certain as I'm sitting here—that all those folks at the boarding house that are peeking round and trying to hunt out something against us—and have been now ever since that Victory Day—are just getting where they're going to find out. In not longer than a week or two. No, sir. In not longer than that it's got to be public property about us."

"Well, suppose it is?" I said.

"Supposing it is?" she said back. "What kind of a wife would I make for any man? What kind of a feeling would he have for me then when he knew? Especially Cole Hawkins!"

"I'm not so sure about that," I told her. "Not about Cole Hawkins."

"I am," she replied. And you are. And you know it. There's nothing that would set any-

body in the world back with him so much as one thing—thinking that they had fooled, swindled or lied to him. You know that just as well as I do."

"Look here," I said, going on combating her—trying to. "Do you think that Cole Hawkins is in any kind of position to criticize? "Do you think Cole Hawkins has been better than you have?"

"No, sir," she told me. "I think he's been a thousand times worse in a lot of ways. He's told me practically all about himself. But he's never been tricky or deceiving, sir. That isn't him."

"Well, then," I argued, "if that's the way you feel, why don't you do this: Why don't you just do as he did, apparently—come right out straight and tell him your story? You told it all to me," I said, "didn't you?"

She nodded, looking at me.

"It didn't strike me as such a horrible revelation of sin," I said, smiling at her. "And I'm willing to guarantee it won't him, either."

"What do you mean?" she asked me.

"I mean for you to go to him—like he did to you, evidently."

"Go to him?" she said. "And tell him I wanted to explain to him—myself? Judge," she said, "it's easy to see you're not a woman by just the

way you look at things. No woman—no girl—could go to a man and explain about herself so's a man would take her. And, besides, judge," she said, sitting up straighter, "I wouldn't marry him anyhow—putting that all one side."

"Why not?" I said to her, smiling again—trying to. "Is this because you love him too? Because you don't feel you are good enough for that wild boy—Cole Hawkins?"

"Yes, sir, it is. That's just what it is."

"What have you done compared to him," I asked her—"ever?"

"I'll tell you what. I'll tell you why. You can say what you want to, sir, a man's different from a woman. More is expected of her. And I don't think it's bad to say so. It's a compliment in a kind of way—to the woman."

She sat still then for a few minutes; and I with her.

"I've thought a lot about that, judge, naturally," she said, "since that trial; and I know I'm right. A real wife is just one thing—she's pure white or she's nothing. She can't be a little damaged or a little soiled. She's got to be white clear through—all over—or she's just nothing at all. And it don't make any difference either—if she isn't white—about just how the spots got there. They're there just the same. You never

get them out. Only a miracle could," she said, talking slower and opening and clenching her hands, and then stopping talking entirely for a minute.

"No, sir. No, sir," she said, starting up from her silence again after a little bit. "If I could cleanse myself, if I could only make myself clean—from all I've been through."

"For no fault of yours—absolutely," I said.

"That makes no difference, judge. It's there. It's there. And it will never quite come off. Only a miracle could do that, sir. And miracles don't happen any longer. And I certainly am not going to bring that kind of a wife to Cole Hawkins. Let alone go and tell him about it. Explain myself. Go through—that torture, judge—for nothing!"

"You're just plain crazy, that's all," I told her. "You're just a crazy young fool. Two of you," I said. "I've lived some years and I've seen some crazy boys and girls and men and women in love; but I never saw anything crazier or more ridiculous than you two.

"First him," I said, when she didn't answer, "coming in here, mooning round, talking to me, scared to death, because he knows he isn't fit for you!"

"Did he tell you that, judge?" she said in a quick, eager voice.

"Yes, ma'am," I told her, "a hundred times. In more ways than speech. And now you come here trying to tell me the same thing. You talk about the illusions and delusions and catalepsies of youth!" I told her, arguing my case. "Here's the height of it. You can imagine how it looks to a person of my age, who's witnessing it. Two crazy young fools with happiness just at their finger tips—for the grasping—and backing and refusing and shying away. Because," I said, "they love each other—too much—to marry!"

"I can't—that's all," she said, after a minute or so, in a low voice. "It's no use talking now. That's all settled, sir."

"Tell me," I asked, thinking, "just what did you do that night—at that proposal he made to you—or was it night?"

"Yes, sir. It was night. We were out driving together."

"As usual. And he asked you to marry him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right away, I expect. That would be about like him. He'd want to tear away right off with you to the end of the world."

"He would have run away, right there, I suppose," she said, "and married me—if I'd let him."

"He's just a little bit impatient by nature," I told her, "in some ways!"

"Yes, sir, he is," she said, and smiled—a little small fraction of a smile.

"And you refused him?"

"I did—yes."

"How hard? How definitely? How final was this thing?" I asked her. "That's what I'm aiming at."

"It was pretty mighty final, judge," she said. "I told him I never could marry him under any circumstances. I was sorry. I liked him a heap. But I couldn't marry him ever. And——"

"And what then?" I asked, prompting her.

"And when he insisted—on knowing why, and all that—I told him I expected we'd better not ride together any more. I thought it would be better all round—if we stopped seeing each other at all."

"Seeing each other at all!" I repeated.

Her face got white again now—white as it had always been before—and then red, with a great flush and rush of red.

"Oh, judge," she said in a sudden louder voice, "can't you see? The only thing I want now in the whole world, sir? Can't you help me to get it—in some way?"

"What?" I asked, staring at her—that look in her face.

"To get away, sir. To leave town right away. Now!"

"Where would you go?" I asked her. "What would you do?"

"I don't know, sir," she said. "That's what I thought maybe you might tell me. Isn't there some place, sir," she said, "some work somewhere that I could get out and do? Isn't there, sir? I'd be not much good, sir, at first. I never was, sir. I was bred and reared for something else—for show. But I'd work—I'd work my fingers to the bone, sir. I'd learn. I can promise you, sir."

"Why, yes," I told her. "I expect—somewhere—I would know somebody."

"Could you get me, do you think, to some great big city, sir, like New York or Chicago?"

"Why," I asked her, "such a large order to start with?"

"Only this," she said: "There wouldn't be anybody who would know me there. I could start over—as something new."

"You want to go and bury yourself, deep in several million folks, so you'll never be seen?"

"By anybody that ever knew me."

"Well, it might be done, I expect," I said, thinking without any great enthusiasm about her alone in a city. "But there are a number of things to be considered first. What about your mother?"

Her hands dropped back into her lap.

"She might go and live with Robert Lee some-

where—when he comes out," he suggested.

She sprang up suddenly then, her eyes dilated.

"But anyhow—no matter what," she cried—"I can't stay here any longer. I won't! She can't expect me to do that again. I'll do anything—anything! But I won't stay here any longer—not a minute!" she said, her big eyes opening still more.

"Why," I asked her, "must you go this minute? Is there any reason that you know—that's new?"

"It's all coming out now—any time!" she said.

"It hasn't yet," I told her.

"Oh, judge!" she said, "can't you see? Can't you see yet? I can't stay here. I can't stay here and go through—all that—degradation—and shame, sir, now! Before him!"

She broke down then—sat down again, with her big fancy hat down on my old desk, against some sheepskin statute books.

"Don't take on so, Virginia," I said, patting her on her arm. "Don't, daughter, it ain't necessary. And it won't do you one particle of good. You let me think it over—till tomorrow or the next day. You come here, say, the day after tomorrow about four o'clock in the evening, and we'll see."

"You see, don't you, judge?" she told me, sitting up finally. "That's one thing. I can't be

here and face him—ever see him again—after he learns—about everything! How I've deceived him—all about my following him, deceiving him. I've got to be spared that, anyhow. That would be worse than death, a heap."

"Virginia," I said, when she straightened herself up and got herself together again, "I want to tell you something, daughter. You're starting out right, girl. You've got the real material right there in you. You're making too much of this," I said. "If you were ten times worse than you are—if you were as bad as you think you are even—you'd be a splendid fine woman. And now, if you only have half a chance, you'll be one of the finest I ever knew. And I'm going to see you have a chance some day. And meanwhile I'm going to say now to you I'm proud of you and I'm glad to know you and be counted among your friends, and I'm going to ask you to shake hands on that."

She flushed up. That pleased her, I could see that.

"I expect, considering everything, judge," she told me, "you're entitled to more'n that, sir."

And she came right over to me, and I took advantage of my privilege—to my great satisfaction.

"Come round the day after tomorrow evening, I told her. I'm kind of busy tomorrow, but by that time I'll try and work out some way to help you. Don't you fret. We'll fix it somehow."

XVI

WE did not either of us suspect, naturally, at that time, just how much that next two days was destined to bring forth. Though now, after the event, of course, I look back upon the history of that next forty-eight hours, as Sam Barsam would say, as perhaps the most perfervid period in my autobiography.

The excitement began that evening, when I was down in my office after dinner and along about eight o'clock Cole Hawkins came drifting in. I could see right off he had been drinking again.

"H'lo, judge," he said, flinging himself down into a chair.

"Hello, Cole," I told him.

Then he sat there a minute or so without speaking, looking at me with those bold black eyes, under his heavy black eyebrows.

"You know that girl," he asked me finally, "up at your boarding house that I've been going round with some lately—Miss Fairborn?"

"Yes, sir," I said, watching him, "I expect I do."

"She's turned me down."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"So'm I," he answered, talking brief, the way he did when he was getting drunk and ugly.

"I thought maybe she'd take you and make a man out of you, Cole," I told him.

"To hell with me!" he said. "I'm nothing; and never have been. And she did just right to push me back. I ain't fit for her to walk on—and never was. But there's one thing I wanted to ask you about."

"Fire ahead," I told him.

"Did you ever hear lately that she and her mother were going to leave town right off?"

"I just saw her mother yesterday," I told him, lying as little as I could, "and she didn't say anything. I should say she was figuring on staying—for all she told me."

"Well, they ain't. They're going, I understand," he told me.

"Is that so?" I answered. "It must be something sudden."

"It is," he said right off, "or that's the way I get it. Now look here, judge," he said, getting his whiskey breath up a little nearer to me; "now I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to tell me right. For I believe there's some special reason for this thing—their deciding to go so sud-

den—if that's right. You know how that crowd —that cackling hen yard in the front parlour of Mrs. Tusset's—were talking and squawking about her when that thing happened—after that day of the Rose Pageant."

"I do. Yes."

"Without a word of truth or substantiation about any part of it—except that they made up a parcel of lies and told them till they believed them."

"I believe you're right about that," I said.

"I know I'm right, judge. You may think I'm a fool and I'm prejudiced because I went and fell in love with the girl. But let me tell you something. I know I'm no fool—if I do act that way mostly. I don't need any diagram of the inside of the soul of a girl, or a man either, to know them. I know what I'm talking with, after just a little—and so do you; when they're real and when they're just shoddy. And there's the finest, straightest-eyed girl you'll meet in all your days. I ain't been so particular in my company with women as I might have been, maybe, for my own good. But just the same I know a good woman and respect her when I meet her none the less for all that—more, I expect!"

"I don't doubt it," I told him.

And then he went on—as the young are apt to

do—on the merits of their particular illusion in the way of women.

"It isn't only that," he said. "I'm not fooling myself. After all the talk about this girl at first, naturally, I watched her and I tried her out. You take the way she acts when you're on the road—taking a chance with a machine—up against some sharp corner in driving—that's where you can tell real folks, when they're in a corner! Not a squeal, not a whimper out of her—when the rest of them would be squawking their fool heads off. There's a girl that's white straight through. I know it. She couldn't trick or deceive you if she wanted to. She wouldn't know how."

I moved just a little at that, recalling, naturally, what the girl herself had been saying to me not four hours before from the same position—the same chair—about white wives and deceiving and herself.

"No, sir," he said. "There's a girl some fine man will get sometime, and she'll deserve him. She's had a lot of trouble in her life, judge, that girl. I know that—though she never would tell me what it was. She wouldn't. She isn't the kind that would holler. But that mother of hers is concerned in it—any fool can see that—what she's tried to do with her. Ain't she the devil—that woman?"

"The illusions of one generation always look a little odd to the next one," I told him, "especially its styles it likes its women served in."

"You're probably right, judge," he told me, giving me a stare, "though I don't know what you mean."

"All you've got to do is to look at the fashion plates and read the talk of the women in the novels of the time of the Civil War and after," I said, "to see—when your mother and aunts were at the height of their illusions. The women of one generation are queer sights to the next one. I don't know anything that styles change quicker in than women—not only their clothes but themselves—the kind of soul it's fashionable for a woman to have."

"You're probably right, judge," he said, giving me that fixed, indifferent stare under his black hair and eyebrows. "I never was great on speculating on such things. I ain't got the head to, I reckon."

"All I wanted to say was," I told him, "that the mother is very likely acting according to her lights—even if you and I don't fancy them."

"Let it go at that," he said. "But here, what I want to ask tonight—I'm trying to find out just what's behind their getting out of town so sudden and unexpected—if that story's true. It might be there was some new lying scandal from that crowd up at your place. Those educated hens and

that king of the hen yard—that Cupid Calvert. I wanted to find that out. Because if there is," he said, "lemme tell you something, judge: There's going to be some fireworks start—some doings they'll want to put in when they're writing up the town history."

"Let me tell you something now," I said. "I don't know anything about what you claim here. My belief is that there's nothing new of that kind. If there is I haven't heard it. You're getting suspicious, the way you're apt to when you're like this—when you're drinking. I tell you now, son, straight," I said to him, "I'm sorry to see it. You haven't been like this for weeks. And if this girl has had something to do with pulling you up—as I more than suspect she has—I'm twice sorry that she's through with you."

"To hell with me!" he said. "What do I amount to? I'm just a discard—all round!"

And he went out after that—with his hat pulled down low over his ugly eyes.

The next development in that somewhat memorable forty-eight hours came that next morning. I was surprised in the middle of the morning to see Cupid Calvert coming in my office door. I knew then there must be some pressing news to communicate.

"I was just passing by, judge," he told me, "and

I thought I'd run in and tell you something new—something real rich and riotous."

"What's that?"

"Eureka, judge!" he said, taking out a large blue strong-smelling letter from his pocket and waving it. "Eureka—which is the French for follow little Cupid and see!"

"See what?"

"You know the dope we've all been looking for?"

"Which?" I asked him.

"About Snowy Shoulders and the Cockatoo."

I didn't say a word. But I didn't have to.

"I've got it right here. It's a screamer, judge."

"Where'd you get it? Where'd you run it down finally?" I asked, studying him.

"There's a girl I met here—going through in an opera company," he informed me. "She lived in St. Louis, I remembered," he said, waving his letter.

"I might have known," I said. "My nose might have told me. It smells like somebody had opened a bottle of cologne water in here."

"It's a frantic tale, judge," he said. "You'll enjoy hearing it."

And he went on and gave me the outline of the situation in St. Louis—the relation of the women to that Gluber, the dress salesman.

"You know what they are," he said, "if you go

into a certain class of life in a big city. Those fellows like that do business with flashy shopgirls and theatrical folks and mechanics' wives—and some others we won't mention. Especially some others."

"Women that have got more ambition to show themselves off than they have sense," I said.

"Right, judge. He sells them flashy stuff at three and four profits and trusts to his wits and his system for getting it all in. They've got a great system, fellows like that. He has."

"A system?" I repeated.

"No set thing, only holds of different kinds that he's got on the different kinds of women."

"Blackmail," I said, "for instance."

"Yes. Fear—of one thing or another. That somebody else will get to know something about them or what they've done—or just the fact that they're spending money. He scares women—that's his business—till they pay him. He has been at it for years. He's got them down cold—all kinds. He has had them by the thousands—he runs a little women's hell of his own, with branches in half a dozen cities. A nice profitable little women's hell. And he's the king of it. And they all shake and whimper when he gets after them."

"I wish we had had him down here," I told him,

"just after the old war, when we got loose and well fixed to deal with that kind of cattle for ourselves. But look here," I said, trying him out to see, "what else is there in this? Did you get any information about what hold it was—just—that this sweet-faced, sweet-minded dressmaker had on these two?"

"You mean that anonymous letter—that Pitman murder thing?"

"Yes."

"No, sir, I haven't, judge," he told me. "That's coming later. Our eminent detective force is working on that now, sir."

"I see. I understand," I told him. "And now you've acquainted me with that fact, let me tell you something—give you some advice—that may or may not be of some use to you. But it'll come cheap. It won't cost you anything."

"What's that?"

"If I was you," I told him, "I don't believe I'd go peddling round that news much."

"Why not?"

"Not so's it might get back to Cole Hawkins, anyway."

"Oh," he said, with a big gleaming grin on his round face, "now you mention that, judge, I've got some more news for you. That's off, I believe. I believe there's some row between those two!"

"You don't mean it?" I said.

"Yes, sir, judge," he informed me. "The Night Riders seem to have split up and gone out of business. The last night or two Snowy Shoulders has been staying at home and Cole Hawkins has been out tearing round alone. You heard about last night?"

"No."

"He's been drinking again. He was out till midnight in that Child of Hell, raging up and down the road. Starting his old game—wiping the mud guards off the road hogs—or the ones he claims are lying over too much on the other man's side of the road."

"They don't on his much, I expect."

"No. But he disciplines them for the others. You know how—and how as good a driver as he is can manage to put the other fellow in wrong. He'll kill somebody some day before he's through."

"Yes," I said, "I'm afraid so myself. But let me tell you something more. He may be off with that girl—like you say—but I'd still be a little cautious and conservative about having any remarks about her or her affairs get back to him as starting and originating from me personally, if I was in your place. I may be wrong. I'm just telling you how I'd feel myself."

"Don't you worry, judge," said Cupid.

"You know what he is," I warned him, "when he's like this. What he's done two or three times already in this town—when he took a fancy against one or two."

"He's a murderer, that's what he is," said Calvert. "Somebody ought to put him back of the bars."

"I was just telling you," I said to him.

"I want to tell you something too, judge," Calvert told me. "I wasn't born yesterday."

He went on then, out to other places. I could imagine just about how long what I'd said would keep him from circulating his new information, especially among the whispering women at the boarding house.

It was night again, the next night, when the next step came. I was in my office reading again when this man I knew came rushing in.

"You know what's happened tonight, judge?" he asked me, all out of breath.

"No, sir. What has?" I said, looking up.

"You know about Cole Hawkins—how he's been drinking again the last few days."

"I heard so, sir. Yes, sir."

"He's out tonight hunting young Cupid Calvert—swearing he's going to kill him on sight."

I got up on my feet. "You don't mean that?" I said, sitting back again.

"I do, judge. I mean just that. And you know what that signifies—when he gets that way!"

"I can reason it out," I said. "But what's the matter?" I asked him, to see what he knew—what had come out so far.

"I don't know," he said. "Nobody seems to know. Only some claim it's got something to do with that girl up at your boarding house—that Fairborn girl, who made such a breakdown at the last Rose Pageant."

"Where's Calvert?" I asked him. "What are they doing about him?"

"They've got him out of the way, judge—for to-night!"

"That's good," I said.

"Look here, judge," he said to me then. "We can't have this thing going on in this town—a shooting, like way back, years ago."

"No. sir," I said. "I don't say we can myself."

"And you're the man to stop it," he told me. "You've got to go to Cole and hold him off. You're the only man in the county that's got any influence with him."

"I'll go, I expect," I said, "and see what I can do, anyway."

So I got my hat and went out.

XVII

I WALKED over to the hotel where Cole Hawkins was boarding then and asked for him.

"He just went out, judge," said the clerk. "I expect you'll find him over at the garage. He just started over there in that direction, sir."

They all stopped their talking. I could feel their eyes on my back, looking at me, when I went out.

So I went over to the garage and found Cole just climbing into the long low red Child of Hell.

"Take me in that thing," I told him, "and drive me over to my office. I've got something I want to talk over with you."

He looked up at me under those black eyebrows without answering. But he went.

"All right. Climb in," he said.

And we went snorting and barking over to my office—in about ten snorts.

"Now then," I said, when I had him upstairs and sitting down by my desk again, "just what is it you're trying to do now?"

"Do—what?" he said, giving me an ugly look.

"You know what I mean," I told him.

"Maybe I do—and maybe I don't!" he answered back, still holding me off, looking black.

"Is it true," I asked him straight then—"what they're telling round town—that you're out hunting young Calvert with a gun?"

"S'pose I was—what of it?"

"Why? What's the object?"

"You've got your nerve with you!" he said to me. I could smell his breath clear across the desk.

"Why?" I went on asking him. "What do you want to kill him for?"

"He's lived long enough—that's one reason," he said. "And a good enough one too—for most people!"

I saw I had him started.

"I've been looking for that fat yelping poodle dog for some time," he told me then, "if you want to know."

"Look here, Cole," I said to him. "This ain't Mexico. Folks ain't going round the streets of Carthage any longer shooting each other full of lead because they don't like the colour of each other's hair. What's going on here, anyhow?"

"You know as well as I do," he said, loosening up a little bit more. "Or if you don't you will before long. But I ain't talking about that, either!" he said, stopping.

"What is it, Cole?" I asked him. "Come on now —tell me. I want to know—and you've got a right to tell me."

"I'll tell you what it is," he said then finally, staring back into my eyes, "if you've got to know! For your own information, strictly! You know what I was telling you about that other evening, about wanting to find out whether there were any more false scandals started about that person I was speaking to you of?"

"Yes."

"Well—I've found out, that's all. There were. And it's that thing—Calvert!"

"Calvert!" I said after him.

"Yes, sir. You know how he is—how he's been in this town for years—laughing and sneering and lying about folks that he didn't fancy or had turned him down—or he just thought would make good targets to aim his funny thoughts at—or start some scandal about."

I nodded, with my eye on him.

"Well, he's done his last slandering of women round this place, that's all!"

"How so?"

"Well, this time he's done it once too often. He's been round town here lately peddling a lot of lies about this girl I'm talking to you about—shaming them out of town. And nobody's had

the manhood to come out and tear his lying insides out of him. But this is the time he's going to be come up with. I'm after him this time," he said, and stopped, holding his dangerous black eyes into mine. "And I've sent word to him so."

"You mean to tell me——" I started saying.

"I've got the same compassion for him," he said, "as for a sick toad. He's driving them out of town—trying to," he said. "But he's going out—on a damned sight longer journey. They've got him hid away somewhere now—in some stinking hole. But I ain't worried. I'll catch up with him before I'm through. And when I do he's going out on that long journey I was telling you about—to a damned sight warmer country. And if I go with him—so much the better. I'm getting generally sick hanging round this world, being in the way of others—never making good! Maybe they'll find some more use for me in hell."

"Cole," I told him, "you're a fool."

"Maybe I am, judge," he told me, very cool and calm and ugly, "but nobody can say I don't do what I say I will."

"You've been drinking again."

"Maybe I have."

"I thought you'd straightened out," I said, "and done away with the drinking—since you'd been with that girl."

"I did, judge—while I was with her. I would now, if I still was, I expect. But that ain't any business——"

"Don't you know," I broke in on him, "that anything like this isn't going to help the girl any —what you are doing now?"

"What I know is this," he told me—"just this: I'm through. I understand that. I may never speak to her again. But just the same, nobody's going round circulating low-down lying scandals about her—and live."

"What were the scandals?" I asked him.

"I don't know. Some lie about her and her mother coming on here from the slums of St. Louis —backed by that cheap crooked dressmaker. I don't know—some lie on the face of it—to anybody that knows the girl and ever talked with her."

"Well, if it's a lie," I said, shivering inside to see how the thing was going, "it'll kill itself. It will——"

"That's the trouble," he broke in on me. "It's a damned plausible lie some ways, like everything else he gets up. That's the worst of it. Now is that all?" he said, getting to his feet.

"Look a here," I said, trying to keep him there. But he wouldn't be kept.

"Is that all?" he repeated.

"You're making a mistake all round, Cole. Sit down again," I begged of him.

"No. I ain't just in a real talkative mood to-night," he told me, and went out the door.

I sat there thinking long after I heard him and his Child of Hell go roaring and barking up the street, patrolling round, maybe, for a sight of Calvert. I was thinking of it a good part of the night—there in my office and in my bedroom. I couldn't appear to work it out. If I couldn't influence and hold him back, I didn't know who could—unless perhaps one person—who wouldn't naturally be available! And, moreover, I couldn't very well go to anybody else anyhow—with what I'd got in confidence.

It looked bad to me. It did the next morning. It was all over town now—about the two men—though the girl's name wasn't in it so very much yet. Calvert was hid away still somewhere, they said. He was away from the boarding house, I knew that. Hawkins was still drunk, racing down the road.

"He almost got another car last night," a man called me up to say on the telephone. "Something's got to be done about him—that's certain sure."

And not two minutes afterward the phone rang again, and I heard a woman's voice—quick and sharp and breathless—on the wire.

"Hello, judge."

"Hello."

"This is Virginia."

"Why, hello, Virginia. Hello, girl. Ain't you up kind of early this morning?"

"Judge," she said, not answering me, "I want to come down to your office—right now! Are you alone?"

"Yes," I said. "Come right down."

I suspicioned from her voice what it might be.

She was white when she came in; more than ever the girl of ivory they first talked about.

"Judge," she said, not sitting down, "is it true? Is it true, sir—that Cole Hawkins is hunting to kill that Calvert?"

I didn't answer.

"For what he said about me?"

"Sit down first," I told her, "and tell me what you're driving at, and then maybe I'll answer your question."

She sat down and told me. That white-livered, yellow-haired Calvert had sent word to her—to save his honery mean skin.

"What did he want you to do?" I asked her. "What did he say?"

"He said he knew—if I went to him—to Cole—and told him to stop—to tell him that he knew that he was wrong——"

"Calvert knew, you mean?"

"Yes. And would apologize—to me, or anybody—why, then, he knew, judge, that would fix it with Cole—for everybody. For me and my reputation!"

"Your reputation!" I said. "The low-down hound!"

"Yes, sir."

"But it wouldn't. It wouldn't fix it—with Cole Hawkins or your reputation either—if he apologized a million times. I don't believe you can hold Cole off him now."

She was almost whispering when she answered me.

"I could stop him, judge," she said—"in one way!"

"What way?"

"I could go and tell him—he couldn't blame Calvert," she said, talking even lower.

"Couldn't blame him!" I broke in.

"Because—what he told—was the truth!"

I sat and stared at her.

She straightened up a little and talked louder then. "That would fix it, judge," she said.

"The truth!" I answered her. "You don't know what Calvert's said. You don't know it is the truth. It probably ain't."

"It's near enough, judge," she told me, with that

old hopeless tone she used to have at first coming back into her voice, "so he won't be killing anybody —on my account—any more!"

"Virginia. Girl," I said. "I won't stand for it. I won't stand for anything of the kind. I won't allow you."

"You can't help yourself, I expect," she told me.

"No. You can't go to him—not the way it is with you two," I told her. "I'd go myself first—if that was the thing to be done!"

"What good would that do, sir?" she asked me. "He wouldn't believe you, you know that—even if you did tell him what I've been. He'd only want to kill you, probably—add you to Calvert! No, sir," she said. "There's just one way—and one person. I've got to do it."

"That's no such thing," I said. "You know yourself what you said about it—about how that was the only thing left for you now—not to tell him or see him even, after he knew. That it would kill you even to stay and look him in the face—after he heard about you. And now you're proposing to go yourself and——"

"Don't make it any harder, judge," she told me, "than it has to be for me. For it's going to be done."

"Not for that cur, Calvert," I said.

"No, sir. No, sir," she said, very slow and

quiet. "Not for him—or for myself either."

"No," I said. "No! Cole Hawkins' ain't worth that, either."

"Yes he is, judge," she said. "He is—to me! Let alone what he is to me—now. He cared for me—he was kind to me—not to my looks, my body. To me! The only man I ever knew—I think. He always did all kinds of things for me—that first time, when I was in trouble. Oh, I know—how it all started.

"Do you think after that," she went on after awhile—"after all he's been to me—that I'm just going to run away and let him get into any bad trouble like this for me now? No, sir. Never!"

"Virginia," I said, getting to my feet, "stand up here. I want to tell you, ma'am, right here and now, you're the finest woman God ever made, Girl. And I'm proud to know you. And I'd like nothing better than to think you were my daughter. I believe, as it is, I'll adopt you!"

"I wish you would, judge—sometimes!" she said, coming over toward me.

"I will," I said to her. "Right now!"

And she looked up after awhile from where I had my arm about her and said: "After this, judge—after I get this done—can I go, sir, then? Will you help me off to some big place—where I can just hide and hide and hide myself—forever?"

"From everybody but me, you can," I told her, comforting her.

"Yes, sir," she said after awhile more, and stood back again and wiped her eyes.

"Where are you going now?" I asked her.

"Just to the telephone," she said. "That's all."

XVIII

I WOULDN'T be much surprised if she had used that telephone number before. Anyhow she hit the right place at the right time to find the man she was calling for. I stood there staring, listening to see what was going on.

She told him who it was.

"Who?" came back his voice on the receiver.

I could hear it speaking out half across the room. Eager and quick—like a boy's voice should be.

"Virginia," she said again. "I want to ask you a favour."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you be willing to take me riding again—if I asked you?"

"Would I be willing?" the voice in the receiver came back—the instrument blurring from its loudness. "When?"

"Could you tonight?"

"Could I tonight? No. Not a bit! When?"

"The—the same time."

"Right. Right," came the loud surprised voice

again. "That is, if that's the earliest time there is."

"That will be the earliest—the best, anyway, I expect," she said, and closed him off with a short laugh.

She came over to me with a very red face. "It will be easier when I get started, I expect, judge!" she said—to say something, apparently!

"You're not going to do that," I told her.

"What?"

"You're not going out riding with Cole Hawkins—today, tonight or any other time! You know the way he's been lately. You must know—from Calvert, probably—how he's been drinking."

"He won't be drinking, judge," she told me, smiling a small confident little smile. "He never has been—not when he was driving out with me."

"I'm not so sure about that—nor how much better off he would be if he did get sober, after the last two or three days. Why don't you see him some other way—if you've got to see him—instead of taking the chances of being all splintered up by that wild devil in that car?"

"There are quite a few reasons, judge," she told me.

"What, for instance?"

"Well, we always have been together that way."

"Yes," I said, waiting.

"It's about the only place we could be alone so well!" she told me then.

"There are other places to be found, I believe, in the civilized world as now known to man," I answered her.

But she would'nt listen to me.

"What is the real reason," I said, "that you want to go out with him in that machine—and get killed?"

"It would be easier, judge," she said finally, "if you have to know, for me!"

"Easier?"

"I can talk to him," she said. "Tell him what I've got to—just as well, anyhow, when he's occupied driving—a little. It will be bad enough without his eyes all the time on my face."

"Oh," I said.

"There'll be no danger. You'll see," she told me.

I wasn't so sure myself. I sat there an hour or so after she had gone, thinking it over, considering what it was right for me to do under the circumstances.

Finally I called Cole up on the telephone myself.

"Look a here, Cole," I said when I'd got him, "you know who's talking, I expect."

"Yes," he said. His voice was still hoarse from his drinking.

"All right," I said. "Now you listen to me, for I've got some right important advice to give you."

He gave a kind of grunt over the wire, thinking, I expect, that I was interfering in his business again.

"I've been brought in through special reasons—not specially of my own choosing—into your affairs," I said. "And I expect very likely you don't care for it. But as I happen to know some things I want to tell you about them."

"Fire ahead," he said, brief and curt.

"Now let me tell you something, Cole," I said then. "You're going out riding tonight with the finest lady in this land. There never was a finer one that ever stepped on God's green earth, sir. And I want you to do what you should do under the circumstances; straighten up and tidy up before that time—so you can take her out right."

I could hear him grunt again over the wire—as if he was getting mad. But I went right on regardless.

"Now wait," I told him. "That ain't all! This young woman—this lady I'm talking to you about—is about to do a thing for you, sir, that's the hardest any woman can do for any man, sir. She's going to lower and humble and bow herself in the dust—and she's going to do it for you,

sir, and not for anybody else in this world!"

He didn't break in any more with any more grunts, I noticed. I had him listening.

"Moreover," I went on, "I'm not at liberty to tell you what she'll say to you, but I want to say this to you—that when you hear it and understand it, you'll say—if you're half the man I think you are—that what she tells you is a hundred times to her credit where it's once to her detriment. And if you don't understand it—when she gets through—you come to me and I'll explain it all to you."

He didn't say anything to that, either.

"And more than that, sir," I said—"and this is the last I'm going to tell you—I'm going to break confidence also to this extent. This girl is going to do all this—as you'll understand, if you are half bright—for just one reason. Because she loves you. She'll say she doesn't—she'll deny it. She's got a crazy idea that she shouldn't ever marry you. She'll try to run away from you—if she can. But my advice to you is this, sir: When she gets through telling you what she's going to you brush it right aside. And you ask her just two questions: 'Do you love me?' and 'Will you marry me?' Don't you dispute or argue. You hold her up to it—right there! If you lose her," I said, "you are a plain fool. And

if you harm one hair on her head you're a miserable, low-down dog and I'll come round and shoot you myself.

"And that's all, sir," I told him. "Except naturally these are confidences between gentlemen, sir—and I know will be regarded as such, as always. And in closing I'll just say this: She's just ten thousand times better than you deserve, sir. And you ought to spend the rest of this day on your knees thanking God for bringing her to you. If you have sense enough to take her, now she's come!"

And then I shut down the phone, having now stepped in and done all the harm I could in the matter.

XIX

IT was twilight, as I understand it—late twilight when they started. I remember the night myself—a dull, smooth, muddy cloud across the west. Lights began to show after they had gone booming out the driveway—the whispering women, curious at the man's absence and return, peering out after them in the corners of the hall window.

"Where to?" he asked her.

"South," she said. "On the old road." She thought naturally it was her last ride with him.

And then—as I piece the testimony together, from their confidences, out a way—when they had gone out beyond the almshouse, both silent, he waiting for her and she hating to begin, she started in with what she had to do.

"I've got something," she said, "I've got to tell you."

"What is it?" he asked gruffly.

He had been sobering up, getting ready all that day, but his voice was still hoarse and his nerves still raw and jerky.

"Is it true," she asked him—"what they say—that you've been round threatening to shoot that —Calvert?"

"That ain't telling me anything," he said, looking off ahead at his driving, his black eyes on the road. "That's just asking me a question."

"To kill him—on my account?"

He didn't say anything at all now—which was of course saying more than he could any other way.

"Cole," she said, "you can't do it. You aren't justified."

"That's my lookout," he said, speaking finally.

"No," she told him and stopped, hating and dreading to go on.

"Suppose I told you," she said finally, forcing herself, "that it was he that was justified."

"Justified?" he said after her, but not looking round.

"Yes," she said in a faint voice. "That he told the truth!"

"I'd say you were lying too," he told her, never turning his eyes back from his driving.

"No," she said again, when her voice came back to her. "Not if I heard it right—what he said."

"How do you know what he said? Who told you?"

"He did," she said after a minute.

"The dirty poodle!" he said with a great oath.

And they stopped talking again.

"He couldn't tell the truth standing before the bright throne of God Almighty," he told her.

"He told the truth this time, I expect," she answered him, controlling her voice again at last. "Or near enough—so it won't make any difference."

And then she told him the story, starting back with her childhood and the trial.

He said nothing; only now and then when she touched on different points the car would jump forward of a sudden, he expressing his feelings that way involuntarily, his foot on the accelerator.

But when she got to that lawyer—how he took her character and wantonly and deliberately defiled it in that public trial—he broke his silence.

"Where is he?" he asked her. "Where is that beast now?"

"Why?" she asked him.

"Never mind," he told her, but his voice told her more.

"Oh, Cole," she cried out, "can't you think of anything but bitterness and revenge and fighting?"

In answer to her he didn't say anything; but the car jumped on again still faster—on the uneven rutty road, the headlights rushing, sweep-

ing on ahead on the dusty roadside bushes, great clouds of yellow dust following.

"You'll have to stop, hold back a little, Cole," she said. "I can't stand this."

And when he did she started on with her grinding task again.

"We can't kill everybody that we don't like, can we," she said, "or that insults us, nowadays? That's gone by. It's not civilized. And besides, he wasn't to blame entirely, from his lights."

"Who was?"

"Who is—for anything?" she said. "I wonder sometimes. He was just one link in a chain. That's what life is, I've thought sometimes—a steel chain binding you down, one link coming after another, each one not able by itself to do anything, nothing but just one part of the whole. He had some ground anyway to think or claim. And before that, there was my mother—I expect."

And she told him about her mother's planning for her and driving her and decorating her—to use that last surviving asset of the failing Fairborns, the girl's unusual beauty.

"I had to fight," she said—"I've told you that already—for what girlhood I had—against white frocks and white shoes and fancy ribbons. I

wasn't that, naturally, was I? I hope not."

"What?"

"Merchandise—confectionery in pretty packages. I didn't mean to be."

"You never were," he growled, starting up the Child of Hell again and easing her back when he thought!

And he added a few remarks on her mother—as he would, naturally, if he thought them—and had no doubt before.

"No," she said, defending her. "That's the way she is—was made. She couldn't be anything else—from what she was raised in. I expect none of us can."

"I don't know as we can," he admitted, thinking perhaps of himself.

And she went on again, telling him of her mother's circumstances and her own.

"Anyhow," she said, "I was what I was—merchandise. And now, after that trial, I was —spoiled merchandise."

He cursed a denial under his breath.

"She had to do something," she told him about her mother. "After our poor circumstances, anyway—all the money that that trial cost us. And Robert Lee still in prison. She was desperate," she told him. And then she went on to tell him the woman's wild, crazy speculation with that A. Gluber.

"Even he," she said, "wasn't to blame altogether—horrible as he is! I've no doubt she told him—or gave him to understand, anyway—we were propertied people, well able to pay, except just for that moment. That's the way she talks naturally—always has!"

And Hawkins talked uncomplimentary again about both the woman and the man.

"No," she said, disputing him. "But it was about all I could bear," she admitted to him, "sitting there, for sale, and hearing her and knowing how they laughed and sneered and pointed at me—especially after that time in Louisville; knowing all the time that any minute one of those anonymous letters might come and open it all up again, and bare me, shame me all over again.

"I've wondered quite a lot," she said—they were going slower now; he was slowing down, listening to her—"whether in the old days, when my folks back in Virginia raised negroes and negresses to sell down this way—whether this was a kind of revenge—whether the negroes ever felt like I did—had any horror, and shame—anything like that at all."

"I expect," she added, "I'm kind of foolish—that I'm trying to be sorry for myself—to excuse myself."

And then she told him about that gas—that matter I was mixed up in.

"I thought I couldn't go on," she said. "That's what I blame myself most for."

"You blame yourself easier than you do other folks, don't you?" he asked her.

"I was weak—silly—scared," she said. "I didn't understand then that folks that were folks didn't do that—didn't have a right to—especially fixed the way we were. I had no right to die—with my mother and Robert Lee the way they were, depending on me—or believing they were, anyway. It wasn't criminal—it was worse; it was a coward's trick. The only excuse to be said for me was that I had been brought up mighty soft and foolish."

They stopped talking then for a little bit. She made him turn round. They were a good long way out of town, and it was growing black—from these rain clouds in the west. It looked like a thundershower—a poor thing to be out in in that open dish of a racing car.

"So then that's all," she said. "They were justified—Calvert was—in what he said."

But he cursed him just as bitter as before, still unconvinced.

"You'll do what I ask you, Cole?" she asked, starting pleading with him. "You'll promise me that you'll leave him alone?"

"No," he told her.

She went on begging him.

"What's your anxiety about him," he asked her in an ugly voice—"all of a sudden? What is he to you?"

"Nothing. You know that, Cole. Nothing—and a heap less!"

"Then why are you mixing into this? For whose sake?"

"You don't need to have me tell you that," she said in a low, quiet voice. "Or you oughtn't to!"

But she didn't convince him yet. They were going back slowly, the boy dragging it out as long as he could, in spite of that black solid wall rising in the west, shot across with the distant fire of lightning. But neither one minded it much, for that matter—or paid much attention yet.

"Cole," she said, appealing to him finally, "let's let him alone then, and you! Let me ask it from you another way. You told me once you—you loved me."

"I do now," he said, "if that does you any good to know—and always will."

She stopped a minute before she went on—trusted herself to.

"Would you want me to go into court again, through another trial?" she asked him. "Are you so anxious to hurt somebody—for my sake—as that?"

And she covered her face up with her hands.

She convinced him finally then and he promised her. She thanked him for it.

And then they were silent once more. The storm was coming up fast, but he did not hurry. He still lagged—neither one, I expect, noticing it too much, being too concerned with their own affairs and feelings to notice a mere natural catastrophe.

"I wasn't trying to blame you, Cole," she told him. "You mustn't think that."

"Nor anybody else, except yourself!" he answered her.

"No," she said. "I am excusing myself now, I'm afraid. But you don't realize—men don't, I believe—about what women are and have to be. I've thought a heap about a heap of things maybe you wouldn't naturally know in the last year or two—since that trial!"

And the boy swore again under his breath, thinking of it.

"You don't realize what a fragile thing a woman is—what she really is, I mean to say; her actions, her character—what she really has to be to be anything. How fragile and how sort of complicated, Cole, her life is. Everything counts against her so—every little common thought and action; she's got to be so careful in these little things—or

she's nothing. She's got to be perfect or she's nothing—even sometimes, maybe, when it isn't all her own fault."

He was swearing once again under his breath, thinking of the whole thing—of what she was doing now, for him; of that chain of circumstances she had talked about—that had been forged by her life, her ancestry, her whole surroundings, to drag her down and hold her.

"I thought," she said, getting through, "I couldn't tell you this. I'd rather you'd remember me——"

"Remember you!" he said, the car jumping on again with the involuntary push of his foot on the accelerator.

"Yes," she said. "But I am glad now—I've done what I have done. You'll remember me, maybe, sometimes a little better—more kindly, when you think it over."

He didn't answer her.

"Of course now I couldn't expect," she said, struggling on, "you'd think highly of me—not the way you did. I understand that, sir."

And still he held himself back.

"Is that all?" he asked, keeping all expression out of his voice, when she was finally finished. "All the sins you can think of—you've got to tell?"

"Yes," she said, surprised. "Only this: don't believe," she said—she had to say that : —"you don't believe—I didn't give you th pression that what they said about me—that thing they said in that trial was true—cou true!"

"What is this?" Cole Hawkins asked her. insult?" A glare of lightning touched his l set face when he said it. "Do you think tha believe that?"

"I didn't. No," she said, in a very low now. "We must hurry!" she said then, waki to the situation, now her part was done. " what's coming!"

"We can wait a minute or two more, I exp he said, eying the sky. "We've got plen speed. I've got something now I want to as myself. You've told me the truth—up to d haven't you?"

"What!" she said sharply, drawing in breath.

"You have, haven't you?"

"Oh, Cole!" she said, looking up, not seein trap.

"I believe you have. But I want you t me one thing more."

"I'll—I'll tell you anything, Cole," she and stopped, waiting.

"All right," he said. "It's very simple—this question. All I'm going to ask you is this: Do you love me?"

"Oh!" she said with a quick, protesting cry. "That isn't fair."

"No," he said. "I want to know."

"Supposing I did," she said, still avoiding him.

"No," he answered her. "You tell me!"

They were silent again, neither one noticing or remembering that black storm that was coming growling up after them.

"Yes," she said finally. "If—if I hadn't—I wouldn't be here, would I?"

"Now let me tell you something," he told her. "You've said all you want to—now it's my turn to talk for awhile. I'm going to marry you! Understand?"

"Never," she said, rousing up. "Never!"

"You said you loved me."

"Yes," she said after awhile again.

"You know what'll happen to me if you don't?" he asked her. "You can promise yourself this—if you don't—I'll go tearing into hell like a soul afire. I don't have to tell you that."

She tried to deny it.

"You can't, that's all," he told her. "You know it. You're not going to spoil both our lives by your foolishness, not if I know it!"

"No," she said. "Never. I'll never do it. Never. You don't know what you're talking about—not the way a woman would—a girl! I've thought it over too many times. It might seem all right now—but it isn't. I know. You'd regret it—always—later. I know—as you never can."

"What?"

"About a wife. A wife's all white or she's nothing. I—I think too much of you, Cole, to bring you a wife that you'll have to explain and defend all your life to your neighbours."

"What you've done," he told her in a loud voice, "I'll hang up public—and the neighbours will bow down to it and be proud of it, just as I am right now."

She smiled, happy to hear him say so, but not changed in her own mind.

"No," she said, "you don't know what it is. You can't—the way I do!"

"What?"

"To have whispering always following you and fingers pointed behind your back. It would be worse, I should think—a thousand times—about your wife than about yourself!"

"I'd like to see them," he said, "just once, and live!"

"That's it, Cole. You see? All I'd do would be to make you suffer all the time."

But he wouldn't have it that way.

"No. No," she said, still denying him. "Don't let's spoil the last minutes of our last ride together."

"Last ride!" he said with a rough laugh. "Yes—it is. It's the last ride we're going to take before you're married to me. Do you think I'll let you go now I've got you?" he said, his voice hoarsening. "Do you know what I'm going to do now? I'm going to drive straight from here to a minister and we're going to——"

"Oh, Cole," she said. "Don't be—such a boy!"

A great crack of thunder cut her off.

"Cole!" she cried out. "Look yonder! The storm! It's going to be terrible."

"To hell with the storm," he said, but he did start up a little when he caught the blackness and heard the fear in her voice.

"But the first thing," he said, we're going to decide is—that you'll marry me—now, tonight."

"No," she said again. "No. No! I'll bring no man myself as a wife; least of all, you, Cole! No," she said, repeating in a level voice that formula she had worked out for herself, "a wife's all white, Cole, or she's nothing! And nothing in

the world can do that for me—nothing could change what people must always say about me but a miracle—and miracles don't happen nowadays any longer, Cole."

And just then, in the nick of time, her miracle came along.

"Cole! Cole!" she called to him, and sank down into the low seat. "The storm!"

A great flare of wind beat the black trees over them and filled her face and eyes with dust. A big first spat of rain struck the car. He pressed his foot on the accelerator, starting, it seems, for a shelter which he had planned to reach before it really broke. The great car jumped forward. The dusty wind grew wilder. The rain began. They were going now like the devil's express!

"Cole," she cried. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"Something—red lanterns—there on the ground!"

"That's nothing," he said. "They're just making some little small repairs on this road. Not much—or it wouldn't be open at all."

And then they struck that open culvert.

XX

WHEN she came to her senses she was lying there on the surface of the roadway—the car, it seems, swerving as it struck the farther side of the opening and throwing her out forward, to one side. The rain was slashing her face, the sky over her black as the inside of an iron pot.

"Cole! Cole!" she called, sitting up.

Another flash of lightning turned the sky above the ragged jet-black trees into milk. She saw the ditch, and when the lightning died she saw below her the first small glow of fire starting. Then she remembered dimly where she was, started up and found—without thinking of it one way or the other—that she was sound, apparently not seriously hurt.

She stood then and stared over into the ditch of the open culvert—and saw what was probably going to happen. And she knew she must do whatever was to be done herself. She was alone—and would be. All folks in their right senses had gone scuttling home before that storm. For all she knew she was entirely alone—the boy was dead.

The headlights were gone, the batteries and their connections all smashed. But there was some faint light from that fire—just starting, as they say they do, from the oil in the oil pan of the car beneath the engine.

Calling the boy's name still, White Shoulders slid down into the ditch. It was only six or eight feet high, but, striking the bottom in her fancy shoes, she pitched forward on her face and hands. Her hat fell and she snatched it off. Her wet masses of hair came down. Her dress—her mortgaged finery—was plastered to her body by the rain. She flung her hair back out of her face and eyes and, leaning forward, she saw the boy at last.

He lay against one side of the ditch, the body of the car half leaning against the bank—but not so as to crush him. She reached down, touched him, found, with a great sob of happiness, that he was alive, if not conscious—but found too that he was caught, held down. Then she came out again and stared a second at the growing fire underneath the hood—fearing, naturally, first of all, like she would, about the gasoline.

The rain poured down in solid sheets. On first thought, it seemed to her, all she would need to do would be to open the hood above the engine and let the downpour in—if she could find the way to do it or the hood was not too crushed to allow it.

And then she thought—she remembered dimly—the danger there might be in this.

If it were gasoline or oil which had started burning under there, the more water there was the more the fire would spread, be carried along; the quicker the machine, the man, herself, the tank of gasoline might be enveloped in a floating flame.

She knew practically nothing about an automobile—but her decision, her whole instinct, was to leave alone these things that she did not know about—might even very likely change for the worse—and hurry, make haste with all her soul, to free the boy before the fire got him.

She crawled back again to see how she could do this. He was caught, she found, in some way by his arm and sleeve beneath the broken steering wheel and the ditch wall. They were not, she found, groping, held against masonry, but against a fresh cut in the earth—which, it appeared, had been made for widening the old smaller culvert. The smothered flame under the hood seemed to be about the same.

The car lay on its side, only partly tipped over, the front wheels on the outside away from the wall, a foot and a half or two feet off the ground. It had seemed to her when she first crawled up upon the wreck that the machine might be balanced as it lay, so that by standing out on its outside

edge she might tip it back—at least so much that the weight from the steering wheel would be taken off the unconscious boy. She tried this—throwing her whole weight on it.

The car, she thought for a minute, did move. But then at once she saw, with sudden terror, another thing. The motion that she caused—small as it was—started oil or gasoline running somewhere—started the floating fire, which she had feared.

By good luck, it appears, the fire did not flow in the direction of the man she was trying to save, but kept still fairly well under the engine—though, she was afraid, a little more than before under the wooden body of the car. She stopped racking the car and starting up the flow of fire, however she had been doing it, and crawled carefully back over the boy's body and started to dig against the dirt bank.

The fire died down a little with the stopping of the disturbance—whatever it was she had done with the gasoline or oil. The storm, with its sheets of rain soaking the car body, held back to a great extent the catching fire of the woodwork.

The girl dug frantically on—bending over, reaching down over the man's body—clawing, first with her bare fingers and then with a tool she had

put her hand on—a sharp-mouthed wrench. It was a question of time—a race with fire.

Alone, drenched, her clothing glued to her body, she fought the fire and the storm. The rain descended and the flood came; the lightning shot down like blue devils out hunting sinners in the dark; the afterclap of thunder shook loose the iron bolts that clamp down the universe. And from underneath—a lot more fearful to her now than the storm—came up, always more and more, the smoke and smudge from that floating fire from under her—the catastrophe which threatened to be the end of their universe at least, in the final burning of the car or a sudden outburst from the tank of gasoline.

She fought on—alone, frantic, voiceless, desperate—a thing as primitive as the fire or the storm, a human woman fighting for the thing she loved and would easily and gladly by all the laws of Nature give her life for.

The fire in the ruined machine was, it seemed to her, growing now, from some cause. The leakage or flow of gasoline might be increasing and the floating fire extending itself. Or the woodwork in the car beneath might be at last catching. For the smudge and heat beneath her, under the car, were certainly growing. She dug on, tearing

with her crude tool, gasping but never stopping. And it seemed to her at last—she had the despairing hope—that very soon she would have that thing that held him—that wrist and coat sleeve—slipped out from under the comparatively slight hold of the broken steering wheel.

And so she worked on and on. No longer White Shoulders—a confection, a whimsey built from lace and ribbons, for the delectation of mankind; something finer, older, more noble—a woman. Her clothing, soaked with rain, hung to her fine limbs like draperies to a heroic statue—not of Victory; of Desperation, of Fighting Service, of Eve, the primitive, who bore and reared the race and fought and disobeyed God Almighty for the thing she loved.

It was all naturally a matter of minutes, of seconds—all this—though it had seemed hours. The rain dropped off now finally—quite a lot; and the fire, though not spreading backward any more maybe, was now evidently getting its hold upon the car body. And from that, naturally, would come the next and final danger—the going of the tank of gasoline.

Then at last she saw the wrist and sleeve were really coming free—were free! She cried out and set to work to draw the boy's body out—an awkward thing to do. And as she pulled and strained,

with some sudden pain, maybe, Cole Hawkins' senses came back—for one moment only.

"What's this?" he asked, his face close to hers —and fell limp again.

By now the flame—real living fire—was starting, showing through the cracks in the car bottom. The girl's soaked clothing was fireproof—for the present at least; but the heat scorched and blistered her, even burned her flesh, as she tugged and lifted and dragged out her unconscious load, struggling with all the strength of her woman's body to pull the boy out of the tipped car, to safety, the question always in her mind: Could she do this before the gasoline tank went?

She moved him finally, dragged him—a big, strong, robust woman working at the top of her nervous strength—out from the machine; out and one side from the culvert to the soaked turf beside the roadway, out of the danger of explosion from the car when it came! That was the last—the final fierce expenditure of her strength.

They found them both there, side by side, when the light of the burning car called out the people from the nearest house.

The first I heard of it was at nine-twenty-one o'clock. I can remember it from the impression made on me by the hands of the office clock, which I stared at while they were telling me the news on

the telephone. For the folks that found them near their place knew me and knew that I knew the boy quite intimately.

"Cole Hawkins and a girl have been killed out here together in an auto accident!" this man called over the wire. "I thought you'd want to know. They were making over a culvert out here on the main road," he said, telling me the particulars of how it happened, "and they say the workmen must have gone away after work in the evening and forgotten to stop up the road where they'd been driving the work teams in. The temporary fence wasn't set up, and the red lanterns were just sitting there, at one side—on the ground. It must have been raining, when they got there, and they jumped right into the jaws of the thing. I'll tell you more later," he said and shut off.

And right after that he called up again.

"More folks have just come in from out there," he told me this time, "and they say they ain't either of them dead. But they're going to take them both right over to the hospital."

XXI

THEY let me see the doctors after they were through about as soon as anybody.

"He's coming out all right now," they told me. "He's certainly tough. He was stunned for awhile, and one wrist was crushed some—but not so we won't save it."

"What about her—the girl?"

"She was burned a little—but not deep. She got him out in just about time. And naturally she's bruised and battered. But she's not hurt bad. She'll be all right. You can see them both tomorrow sometime. But in the meantime there's one thing I wish you could do—I wish you could keep that mother of the girl out of here. She's too noisy; we can't have her in there with the girl. And we can't have her prowling round the corridors here like a hyena deprived of its young. Those two are all right—all they want is rest—the girl from her mother especially. Judge, you come tell her so. Take her away. Issue a subpœna or injunction or something and take her home with you—to your common habitation at Mrs. Tusset's."

So I made myself useful and took her home and

amused her—let her talk to me till some three or four o'clock in the morning, going over the rearing of the girl, White Shoulders, from the beginning of her education in finery and allurements.

The woman was rather violent at first.

"They've shut me out from my baby, my Virginia!" she wailed to me. "When she most needs me!"

It occurred to me then finally—entirely of my own motion—that never, as matters were now shaping, would I have a better opportunity to act in the capacity of the so-called god in the machine. Having apparently been forced into the position of fate with these two youngsters, why not take the longer view and do a real good lasting job—looking into their far future, as I conceived it now about to be?

So the conversation—not entirely unguided by me—moved in the direction of the other offspring—of Robert Lee, who, as I had suspected for some days, seemed on the point of being released from his short term in prison.

"I should expect, madam," I told his mother, "that you will be going to be with him—that he will need you now, undoubtedly."

"He will judge," she told me, "I expect. I reared him tenderly—to depend on me."

'I was going to say," I told her, "that very likely, in case you felt like taking my assistance and advice, I might be of some service to you in that matter—in getting the boy placed right when he was free again."

"I would take your advice, judge," she answered, complimenting me, "anywhere! On anything! I value it above all things. Would you advise my going and waiting for him—outside the prison—until he is released?"

Her mind ran like wildfire to the first suggestion of romance and chivalry and heroic postures. She lived all her life a maid with long and unbound hair staring out a postern window over a moat bounded by blood-red lilies.

"But what about the means for this?" she asked, remembering. "And what about my child, my Virginia? Are you so certain that she is to survive this shock—that she will surely recover?

"She will recover," I said, "absolutely. The doctors assure me so."

"Unblemished? Unscarred?"

"I understand so," I told her. "The thing now that you and I must look forward to is beyond that—to what may come out of this present situation."

"I see, judge," she said, looking at me keenly

over her pocket handkerchief, her rouge again in a bad state of disrepair.

"I'm afraid, ma'am," I said, "you will think I am too hard and practical in this matter, for you, I know, are a good lot of a romanticist by nature."

"I may be, judge, sir," she said. "Too much so, I'm afraid. Go ahead, please."

"What I was going to say, ma'am," I told her "was this: You find yourself in a somewhat delicate position in your present situation."

"I do, yes," she assented.

"Your finances, in the first place, are in none too good a shape. Several other matters are coming up that may embarrass you, and I was going to suggest a course of action, if you will not consider it thrusting myself too much into your affairs."

"Judge," she said, "nothing would please me more than to have you handle them for me—if you would, sir. I consider it most generous of you to offer, sir. What would you advise? I have come to regard you, sir, as I would my own brother. I depend on you in just that way."

"This matter," I told her then very gravely, "it seems to me—that I want to talk to you about now—marks a very critical juncture, if I may say so, madam, in your affairs."

"Go ahead, please, sir," she directed me.

"Well, madam," I told her then, "if we start at the beginning in your affairs, I expect we can agree upon one thing."

"What's that, judge?" she asked me.

"That an advantageous marriage—in fact this particular marriage which may result from the present situation—would be an almost ideal solution of the problems of your girl and, to an extent, yourself. And perhaps, in fact, the only possible one."

"Yes, sir," she told me. "There's no doubt of that, sir."

"Now here," I told her, "is where I think I may serve you—if you will permit me. I am not practiced, madam," I said, "in matchmaking. But in this particular case, maybe, I might have some advantages."

"Over me!" she said, catching my idea at once

"Over anybody," I said, "alive. I go so far, ma'am, as to flatter myself."

"It's true, sir, I know it," she answered me.

"So, if you will leave this matter for the present in my care—if you will permit me, madam, for the time being to act as sole director of this romantic situation, it might be of very practical advantage to you and your affairs. I feel I can assure you, in fact, that it will be. Whereas,

under some other circumstances, a false step or bad management of any kind might prove fatal."

She looked at me—understanding my intimation fully, and still concealing its full meaning from herself. Half romantic—or romantically unbalanced, as Sam Barsam would say; half or a little more than half, with a clear eye on the necessities, now so very sharp and pressing.

"And then, naturally," I hinted, "there might be some advantages which I personally might bring to you—would be glad to, if you would feel you could put the guidance of your affairs more or less unreservedly into my hands. If you, for instance, should undertake your new duty—your now obvious obligation of taking up your residence with your Robert Lee—I might, I expect, be of assistance in some ways in getting your boy and yourself started in life."

"Judge," she said, "this is too much—too much of an added obligation, sir!"

"Not at all, ma'am. It will be a delight, provided you feel you can put the rearrangement of your affairs rather fully in my hands."

"If I only could, sir," she said.

"You can, certainly," I told her.

"I have made an awful mess of them, sir, haven't I?" she asked.

"It will certainly be a pleasure to me—in more

ways than one," I told her, avoiding that particular question. "For example, it will be a delight, ma'am—an unbounded delight—to have a free hand in dealing with that dressmaker—that scoundrel, A. Gluber, in St. Louis—the way I've got a plan to do, ma'am—if you really desire to put your affairs into my hands!"

"Oh, judge," she said with a little shudder, "if you only will take them! If you only will, sir!"

I had given her the opportunity of withdrawing from the present situation—in which alone I was interested—with all the romantic honours of war; and the practical advantages of reprieve from a desperate situation, thus satisfying her dual personality on both sides. She had accepted. Yet my own advantage, I could still see, had not yet been pushed to its ultimate and logical conclusion. I consequently pushed on from that point.

"All this," I told her, "provided, naturally, that we can bring about—that I can bring about what we both desire between your daughter and my young friend Hawkins—which is still something of a problem, considering the state of their minds when I last knew about them. It will be a delicate situation, in which I shall have to use my judgment, you understand, ma'am, unhampered."

She looked at me some time without speaking.

"Judge," she said finally, "let us be frank. I am a mother, sir, yet I have some sense, some intelligence."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, waiting.

"Judge," she said then after more hesitating, "I think—I believe I see what you mean, sir. You mean to say that my presence at this time would be a detriment rather than a help to the eventuation of this marriage, sir."

"Yes, ma'am," I answered her. "If by that you mean your actual physical presence."

"And even later—when—if—if they become married, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid so," I told her, not mincing matters. "Not, of course," I said, "your entire absence. But your continued presence with them for any length of time would be inadvisable."

She took it somewhat dramatically, speaking at length of the passions and ambitions and sacrifices of motherhood, yet not really hard after all. One side at least of her nature—her practical side—was satisfied. I gained at last the understanding I aimed for—perhaps the most forehanded act of diplomacy in my life—all in anticipation of an event still in the deep calm shadow of the future.

Wild horses, I knew, would not have dragged

the boy away from the girl—nothing would have prevented him, not even that mother. But why, as Sam Barsam said—why not in times of prosperity lay the foundations for adversity? Why not, while beginning, found the air castles of young love and matrimony on a rock? This at least was my reasoning in my one official promotion and futherance of that great law of Nature which operates so inexorably upon the young.

I saw Cole Hawkins first at the hospital in the morning—sitting up in his bed, his arm in a sling.

"How is she?" he asked me first. "Are they telling me the truth? Is she only hurt a little —like they say?"

By that time I could assure him that she was.

"What if I'd killed her?" he asked, and stared off again under that thick mop of hair of his. "What a reckless fool I've always been," he said finally; and then he told me about what he'd been intending to do that night before—to make her marry him then and there—to carry her off with him. "But she wouldn't, judge," he said, staring off, "and do you know why?"

"Why?" I asked him back, though he must have known that I knew, if he had stopped to think.

"Because she thought she wasn't good enough

for me!" he said with a harsh laugh. "For me!" he said, in a bitter, scornful laugh—and stared on out the window opposite him.

"You don't deserve quite so good luck, I'll say myself, as that girl is," I told him.

"Judge," he said to me, "think of it! What she did last night for me. And that ain't all," he said. "She dragged me out of hell once before." And he told me again how she got him to stop drinking.

"You didn't stay put very well, did you?" I asked him.

"I would have, judge," he told me, fastening those fiery black eyes on me, "if she hadn't quit me. If I'd had her I'd have been all right. And I'm not fooling myself in that either, judge. When I say I can do a thing, sir, I can generally be counted on to do it. You know that."

"You've got a mind of your own, I expect—when you get it set on anything," I agreed.

"What do they keep me here for?" he inquired, lashing out with his feet under the bedclothes instead of answering. "I'm not sick. Why don't they let me up?"

"Maybe they want you to rest," I told him.

"Look a here, judge," he said finally. "Do you suppose, anyway, I might still have a chance—

after everything—after last night, almost killing her? Do you suppose I might have a chance with her?"

"Some surface indications might point that way," I told him. "Only for that idea that she's got in her head—that she won't marry you."

And he swore a little under his breath, and threshed round in bed again.

"Look a here, judge," he said. "They'll let you see her maybe, now. You say she's not so very bad."

"See her?" grinning a little in spite of myself.

"Yes, sir. And find out, maybe—how I stand there now."

"Well now, sir," I told him, "as long as I seem to be chosen by fate as Cupid, God of Love, and in order to insure and promote the general peace and welfare of Prendergast County, I'll make the attempt sir—if you say so."

"Go on judge," he begged, not cracking a smile "Will you please, sir?"

So I went out into the hospital corridor again, and they finally let me into her room, where she was sitting up in bed, all bandaged up.

"Judge!" she called out, and held out her arms to me. And I went over by her bedside.

"What do you think of me? How do you like

these bandages?" she asked me when I stood up again and sat down in the chair by her bed. Her voice was almost gay.

"You look well enough to me," I said. "Why?"

"How would you like to look at these forever?"

"What?" I said. "Are you scarred?"

"Probably I am," she told me.

"Don't believe a word she says," the nurse said to me. "There won't be a mark on her in two weeks."

And then the nurse went out.

"You had a pretty narrow squeak of it, daughter," I told Virginia.

"Yes," she said.

"But there's one thing, anyhow," I said, smiling over at her.

"What's that?" she answered, smiling back.

"Your miracle's come at last."

"My miracle?" she said back.

"You know what I mean, ma'am," I said, smiling. "The one thing you were always reverting to—that would clear up your insuperable objections to matrimony."

"What is it you mean, sir?" she still asked me.

"That," I said, and I pointed round the room. The place was full of flowers, banks and mounds of them. "The opinion of your contemporaries,"

I told her. "Your standing in the public estimation."

And I told her some of the nice things I had heard about her in the town—the general praise and admiration of what she had done.

"I've come," I told her finally, "to you from one of your many admirers—to talk to you as an ambassador."

"From who?" she said, her eyes shining, but her voice dropping.

"Cole Hawkins," I told her, and waited for her to speak.

"Well?" I said when she refused to.

"Judge, I can't do it. I've thought it all over," she insisted. But there was no flavour, no determination, to her voice.

"Don't be foolish, Virginia—don't put by your miracle—when it comes right up to you," I said, smiling at her.

"But he's told you, I expect," she went on, persisting a little further, "what I told him—last night. I can't—I can't bring him a wife he'd have all his life to defend. I can't bring him a wife they'll all be pointing at and whispering after."

"Whispering?" I said. "You're wrong."

"Wrong?" she said, watching me.

"Whispering?" I told her. "No. They're shouting since last night. If you want to know about your present reputation—if you want the judgment and opinion of your contemporaries—there they stand all round you," I said, pointing out the flowers in the room. "You've got more admirers and friends today," I said, "than any girl south of the Mason and Dixon's Line—and that's the strongest statement all history contains, ma'am. What's more," I went on, "there's one of them that's burning up now just to see you to speak about four words—in question form. And I'm going out and get him dressed and bring him in to see you."

"No, judge," she said in a faint voice. "No."

"This is under doctor's advice," I assured her. "I'm acting as an expert. It will be the best possible treatment for both your cases," I said, "if he comes in here for just two minutes or so."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly, judge," she said. "Not the way I look now!"

I stepped over to the door and called in the nurse again from the anteroom.

"You help fix this young woman up," I said to her. "Make her bandages look as sweet-pretty and as ornamental as you can. But don't take off one of them, understand. Put some more on if you can. I'm going to bring in a visitor in about

ten minutes who will think those bandages are the finest ornaments a woman ever wore in this world. Which I do myself," I said, turning round to go.

But she made me lean over once more—till she kissed me.

"Don't hurry. Don't hurry too much," she said in a flustered voice when I went out. "Not in less than half an hour, anyhow."

When I left I stumbled over two or three more great bouquets being brought in—for which two or three more gardens had been ravished.

I went back into the room where I had left Cole Hawkins. He was shaking all over.

"You're a real bad man, ain't you?" I said to him. "You're a dangerous-looking customer."

"Quit your fooling, judge," he said. "What did she say to you?"

"I expect," I told him, "she might see you in about half an hour from now. Now—wait a minute," I said. "Hold on! You've got to wait for us to get your clothes on before you go. And don't knock that arm, either! There's plenty of time—twenty-five minutes anyhow before she can see you."

I stayed with him till his time was up.

"You'll need a best man," I said, "to take you over there."

And I went with him down the corridor and knocked at the door.

"Stop shivering and shaking," I said to him. "Haven't I told you it's all right?"

And then the nurse opened the door and it closed after them.

I saw old Judge Pendleton on the street that noon, the first time I'd seen him off his old plantation for years. The whole town had come down to see that black and twisted Child of Hell backed up in the culvert.

"Well, sir," he said, "judge, I came out to see that thing—that auto accident, where that girl saved young Cole Hawkins—alone, with all the chances against her. And I want to say to you, sir, that was a magnificent act!

"By God, sir, I went through the Civil War, sir. I've seen considerable of life and I'm no sentimentalist or idealist, sir. But sir, that was the bravest, most desperate act of hers—digging him out alone from that burning car—I ever heard of. You wouldn't believe—looking at that black wreck there, and what she must have done to get him out—that human nature was capable of it, sir—let alone a delicately reared Southern woman, sir. You wouldn't have said it could be done."

"Judge," I said, "you know, and I know,

better, sir! You know a good woman is capable of anything—any sacrifice, sir—reasonable or unreasonable—for the man she loves. That's what makes them what they are to us, sir. The finest thing in this hard and desperate world."

THE END